

# A Monster's Marriage

**By: Jiu-jitsu dude**

She was a harbinger of darkness, a killer, a monster... and she was happily married to a man who had no idea.

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# Home Life

## Home Life

**Cr00cy is both editor and enabler to my madness**

**Crack-Ship? Never heard of her.**

---

Cinder Fall was a monster.

She knew this. She'd lied, cheated and stole for her entire life. Oh, and killed. It turned out that she had a particular talent for that last one. She'd killed for money, for power, for revenge, for respect, she'd killed because she'd been told to, she'd killed because she wanted to. She'd become so proficient at in fact, that she drew attention of a very exclusive group, one that was, shockingly, even more dangerous than she was.

They'd promised her power, and power meant not having to ever go back to being a scared little girl on the streets. She hadn't been able to sell her soul fast enough.

Cinder Fall was a monster, it was known far and wide. Only one person didn't have any clue of what Cinder Fall truly was, and she'd kill to keep it that way.

Her hand found the handle to the front door of her home. A simple, yet stylish, one floor ranch home in the suburbs of Vale, complete with a small yard and meticulously cared for flower bed. She pushed through the entrance to her home and transformed.

"Honey, I'm home!"

"Cindy? I'm in the kitchen!" Came a familiar voice, one that sounded like home.

She weaved her way through the living room and walked into the kitchen, a smile coming to her face as she saw him. Clad in a 'kiss the cook' apron and cutting up chicken by the sink, with his ridiculous mop of blond hair and deep blue eyes, and that dumb smile on his face, the one that was reserved for her.

"Hey babe, you're late. I was starting to wonder if I was going to find you bleeding out on the street again."

She scoffed. "Jaune, that happened once."

He raised an eyebrow. "Does it need to happen more than once?"

She smirked as she slid up behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "I remember it worked out well for you." She purred.

"Because I got to meet you?"

"Because you got laid."

He chuckled. "You're bad."

"You have no idea."

He turned into her, arms finding their way around her. "What happened?"

She sighed. "I got caught up at work. Long day."

He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "Sorry baby. Why don't you go get changed and relax? I'll bring you something to drink."

She rested her head on his chest. "That sounds nice."

"Then go, I'll be there in a minute." He said, turning her out of the kitchen with a swat on the behind to send her on her way.

A few minutes later, Cinder emerged from her room, clad in the uniform of conquerors. Sweatpants and a Pumpkin Pete hoodie that

her husband had lost the battle for in the opening weeks of their relationship. She'd called it childish, but it'd grown on her, and now it, like him, were hers.

She made her way to the living room, plopping down in her chair. A rich, dark leather recliner that she would have said had far too much padding, till Jaune had shown her the error of her ways. He was good at that.

Her apron clad knight appeared shortly after, his weapon of choice, a martini, in hand.

"Here you go baby."

She gratefully accepted the drink. "My hero." She said, as she patted the area on the seat next to her, inviting him to sit.

"Tell me about it?" He asked as he settled in beside her.

She sighed. "So, we've got a big acquisition coming up right? So, we're having to outsource, and these contractors are killing me."

"That bad?"

"Jaune, they're the worst. This one... Sadam-"

"That's a weird name."

"Don't worry about it. Anyway, he's providing the muscle-er, manpower, and he's just so needy. He's constantly droning on and on about 'what his people are owed' and 'getting their due,' and I keep having to tell him this is the best deal he's going to get."

"Is it a good deal?"

"To die for, babe. We're really going to rock this city to its core, if he'd just listen."

He chuckled. "You sure love hyperbole."

She smiled. "Don't I though?" She scowled again. "But that's not the worst part! He keeps whining about his ex. Is there anything more annoying? I think I'm going to adopt it as a torture method."

"What?"

"Just a joke Jaune." She smiled at him conspiratorially. "Besides, I have people for that."

He shook his head. "You're weird. So, I'm guessing they didn't end on good terms?"

She snorted. "She literally ran away."

His eyes widened. "Wow, that's intense. Does he wear all black to complete the image?"

She gave him a look.

"Holy shit! He does?!"

"Jaune, his last name might as well be Lord, first name Edge."

He chuckled. "You don't have the most expressive of wardrobes either, you know." He picked at the hoodie. "Though Pete does look good on you."

She flicked him. "Hush you. I make everything look good."

He smirked. "You love me."

She ran a hand along his cheek. "I do." The oven beeped from the other room. "Now go fulfill your house husband duties and feed us."

He snorted as he got up. "Just be glad one of us can cook. I swear you could burn water."

"It's a talent."

Her scroll rang, and she glanced at the called ID.

Roman. She groaned.

"You ok?" Jaune asked from the kitchen.

"Fine, it's just a work call."

She flicked the answer button, audio only of course.

"What?" She growled.

"Someone's in a mood."

"Roman, I have neither the time, nor the patience for this. I'm about to go into a VERY important meeting."

"Ok, ok! Geez, I just wanted to give you an update on the Dust."

"Speak." She demanded.

There was silence from the other end of the line for a moment.

"We're behind schedule."

"I'm not a woman to disappoint Roman. How far behind?"

He took a deep breath. "I need another two weeks to do it safely."

"Roman, you misunderstand, it's your safety I'm concerned about. About what will happen to you and the imp you cavort around with if you fail to meet the deadline."

She could *hear* him sweating. "But I-"

"If that Dust isn't in the warehouse by Friday, there will be-"

Jaune called to her from the kitchen. "Cinnamon bun, do you want potatoes or rice with the chicken?"

"Hold on you fool." She whispered into the phone, before covering the receiver. "Do we have sweet potatoes?" She yelled back to her husband.

"Yep! I'll put them on."

"Thank you, baby! You're my kitchen knight!"

"The one and only!"

She removed her hand from the receiver. "They will tell stories about what happens to you for years if you fail me."

"Who was that?"

"Someone that could have you killed with a word. Now, do we understand each other?"

"Yes." Came the forlorn reply.

"Yes, what?" She hissed.

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Good. One way or another, we'll see each other Friday."

She ended the call before he could think of something clever.

"Cinnamon bun? Are you done with your call? Can you set the table?" A voice that sounded like home asked.

"Of course, my knight!" She answered instantly.

Cinder Fall was a monster yes, but to Jaune, she was simply his wife... and she'd kill to keep it that way.

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**Me: Some ships are ridiculous, like Cinder and Jaune.**



**Demetrion (joking): Nah, it could work.**

**Me: Yeah, what would I do? Make an absurd story where Jaune is married to Cinder, but has no idea who or what she is?... I've got to go talk to Cr00cy.**

# A Green Monster

## A Green Monster

**Edited by the extraordinary Cr00cy (go read his stuff, it makes far more sense than this madness)**

**Also, this is a thing now... like a full story, expect weekly-ish updates... God help us all**

**Note: Jaune is a few years older in this timeline/AU**

---

Cinder Fall was a monster.

Emerald Sustrai knew this, but in truth, held somewhat softer feelings for the woman.

To her, Cinder Fall was an animal. A vicious, apex predator to be sure, but one that craved the same things all animals did. Safety and comfort.

She didn't understand the source of her comfort, but then, no one had asked her. But if she understood one thing about animals, it's that you didn't get between them and what was theirs.

Not if you wanted to stay amongst the living.

And so, Emerald began her weekly ritual of standing in front of the Arc-Fall door, trying to purge anything from her mind that might incriminate her boss... to her husband... people were weird.

She took a deep breath, steadied herself, and knocked twice. The face that answered the door was friendly, almost unreasonably friendly, with its bright blue eyes and goofy grin.

"Hey Em! How's it going?" Jaune asked, as he leaned against the door frame.

"Oh, you know, just keeping busy."

"I, um, like your new outfit?" He said, glancing down at her.

*My new outfit?*

She looked down at her usual outfit, one that was meant to draw eyes places other than her hands, and realized what he meant. She had made a habit of changing into something a bit more... conservative, before coming over in the past.

She mentally shrugged. Damage done.

*It's not like I can use my Semblance on him now.*

"I was, uh... hiking. It's a new hobby." She lied.

"Cool." He accepted easily, stepping back and holding the door open. "Come on in and have a seat, I'll go grab Cindy."

"Thanks." *I'll never get used to this.*

She made her way to the living room and settled on the couch, sitting opposite of what she'd learned was 'Cinder's chair.'

*Black leather couch... shocker.*

She was quick to stand when Cinder entered the room, despite Jaune waving for her to remain seated.

"Ma'am." She greeted.

"Cinder." She corrected with a glance at Jaune, motioning for her to take a seat as she found her own. "How are you Emerald?"

"I'm well Cinder. I have an update about the situation at the... office, like you asked." She tried.

Cinder nodded absently. "Yes?"

Emerald coughed and shot a glance towards Jaune, happily resting on his own plush, brown recliner. "We uh, found out where the water was coming from and-"

"Fascinating." Cinder cut her off, eyes scanning over her, before narrowing. "Emerald, that is an... *adventurous* outfit."

*Uh oh.*

"Yeah, she started hiking recently apparently! Surprised me too, I always thought she was a city girl." Jaune offered.

"Hiking? That must be quite a lot of work. My and doesn't she look *thirsty* ? Jaune, could you be a dear and grab our resident 'hiker' some water?"

*Oh fuck.*

"No, no, no! I'm fine!" She blurted out, leaning forward out of her seat.

Cinder tsked. "Nonsense dear, you look positively *parched* ."

Jaune smiled and motioned for her to sit as he stood. "It's just water Em, I'll be right back."

"Thank you dear, take your time." Cinder encouraged.

Emerald's eyes followed him in silent horror as he merrily left her to her doom, Cinder's gaze boring into her. As soon as he cleared the room, she snapped back to the dark-haired woman.

"It's not what you're thinking!"

Cinder raised an eyebrow. "You know what I'm thinking? Is that your Semblance now?"

"N-no, I just-"

"Part of me is surprised you didn't try to use your Semblance on me while you showed off, though I would have known of course."

Emerald's brow creased at that. "How-"

"Because I always know." She said, leaving no room for argument. "Though this," she made a gesture towards the green-haired girl, "cavorting around in front of me AND my husband? Might be worse."

Emerald's jaw worked up and down silently for a moment, sweat trickling down her forehead. "I-"

"Got the water!" Jaune announced, as he re-entered the room, delivering it with a flourish. "Here you go Em."

"T-thanks."

"No problem!" He said, as he walked back over to his chair. "What were you guys talking about? Water in the office? Like a leak?"

"Precisely dear." Cinder answered, staring Emerald down.

She winced. *Ok, I probably could have been a bit more inventive with that one.*

He shrugged. "I can take care of it for you, no need to hire someone."

"That's ok!" Emerald rushed out. "We've got a guy!"

"Are you sure? I'm pretty handy."

Cinder patted his arm and gave him a warm smile. "I know dear, but I think that this was caused by lack of proper maintenance, and I

simply *insist* that people clean up their own messes. Isn't that right Emerald?"

The tan girl nodded numbly.

"Well ok, if you're sure..."

"Certain, my knight. After all, this should be taken care of by..."

"Tomorrow!" Emerald snapped out, sitting on the edge of her seat.

"Excellent." Cinder nodded, before turning to Jaune and motioning to Emerald. "Dear, look at how stressed she is."

He frowned. "You ok Em?"

"Great! Never better! Fantastic!"

Cinder shook her head slowly. "Poor thing's a mess. Jaune, could you go get some wine for us all? Maybe that will calm her nerves."

"Sure!" He agreed, popping up again.

"NO!" She practically shrieked, reaching out to stop him.

"Emerald." Cinder warned in a low tone, forcing her back down into her seat. "Our home is your home, and apparently, what is *mine* is yours."

Jaune shook his head. "Geez Em, you're frazzled. I'll grab some of the good stuff for us, won't be two shakes."

*DON'T LEAVE ME!*

"Oh, I think we still have a bottle of the Mistralian left dear, see if you can find it." Cinder offered as he walked towards the kitchen.

Emerald would bet every dollar she'd ever stolen that bottle didn't exist. She winced as his footsteps faded.

"Cinder, I would never-"

"Oh?" She drawled. "Do you not find my Jaune attractive?"

"No! I mean yes!"

She hummed. "So, you admit to being attracted to my husband."

*This is hell. Mercury smothered me in my sleep last night, and I'm currently in hell.*

"Not that I could particularly blame you of course. After all, I chose him."

She left out a sigh of relief.

*Thank the Gods!*

"If you hadn't acted on it, of course."

*The Gods can fuck right off.*

"I-"

Cinder shrugged. "Let's see how Jaune feels about it, shall we?" She turned and yelled to the other room. "Honey! Did you find the wine? Any will do if you can't find that bottle, but I've got a question for you."

*AAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!* Emerald screamed internally.

"Coming!" His voice called as his footsteps echoed down the hall.

Cinder smirked at her as he entered the room, glasses and wine in hand.

"What's up babe?" He asked, concern clear on his face.

She smiled at him. "Oh, nothing life threatening..." A glance at Emerald confirmed that that was untrue. "... It's just that I've found out what's got Em so down."

He perked up. "What's that?"

Cinder gave him a sad look. "She feels unattractive."

*NONONONONO!*

He scoffed. "That's ridiculous, she's beautiful. I'm sure lots of guys are dying to meet her."

*We're both going to die here Jaune.*

The woman in red sighed. "That's what I said, but she wasn't convinced. She wanted to know what *you* think."

"But I just-"

Cinder shook her head. "No baby, like, would YOU date her? Hypothetically, of course."

Emerald's eyes were about to pop out of her head.

*IT'SATRAPIT'SATRAPIT'SATRAPIT'SATRAP!*

He colored. "Oh."

"You don't have to answer!" She assured him hurriedly.

Cinder silenced her with a hand. "Nonsense dear, it's just a simple question. This is about *you* after all. Jaune?"

He coughed. "Well, I uh..." His eyes met the floor.

*NO! THE ANSWER IS NO! PLEASE JAUNE PLEASE!*



He swallowed and looked at her. "I mean... yeah, if I hadn't met Cindy, and you had asked... I'd probably have been head over heels."

WHHHHHYYYYYYY!?

"Awww, that's so sweet." Cinder crooned at Jaune, before turning her gaze to Emerald. "Now, don't you feel better? Don't you feel more attractive?"

"Amazingly so." She squeaked.

Jaune chuckled as he set the glasses down, pouring wine for them. "Well, now that we've got the awkwardness out of the way, did you want to stay for dinner? I was just about to put something on."

"NO!" She yelped, leaping from her seat, earning a hurt look from the blond. "I mean... You've inspired me! I've got to get back out there! There's plenty of fish in the sea!"

Cinder smiled. "That's the spirit, dear."

"Thanks for everything!" She blurted out as she rushed for the door.

"Go get'em Em!" Jaune called after her as the door slammed. He shook his head and turned to his wife. "You know, I wouldn't have guessed how much of a mess she is."

She chuckled. "Yes, she has a talent for putting up facades." She hummed as she stretched in her chair. "Also, I'm hungry."

He smiled at her. "Dinner will be ready in a jiff."

She shook her head, rising from her seat and walking over to him. "But I'm hungry now."

He laughed. "I can't make it any fast-"

She wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered in ear. "But I'm *hungry*, Jaune."

She smirked, enjoying the way he stiffened, and how his arms wrapped around her soon after.

"Then what kind of house husband would I be if I didn't feed you?"  
He whispered back.

You never get between an animal and what's theirs.

---

**Internet: Hey JJD, how popular do think this is going to be?**

**Me: I assume that it's going to be just Cr00cy, Demetrion, and I reading this.**

**Internet: Well, you know what they say about assumptions...**

**Me: That they make an-**

**Internet: It's that you were fucking wrong.**

**AN: As it turns out, I think that both Demetrion and Cr00cy (both heavy co-conspirators on this story - go read their stuff) are as surprised as I am that there aren't mobs of people rioting outside my house. I guess this might be my thing? Giving people things they didn't know they wanted? Jaune and Qrow bromance, rapping Winter, Casual Cinder.**

# Game Night

**FCr00cy, don't these people understand that they're encouraging my bad behavior by reading this?**

## CHAPTER 3

### Game Night

---

Cinder Fall was a monster.

Mercury Black knew this. He also knew that she was not a monster that you refused.

He'd learned this lesson years ago, on the side of a darkened road, his father's still warm blood soaking into his clothes. It was a lesson that had been reinforced, time and again, as he watched others make that fatal mistake. He didn't consider himself an overly intelligent man, but he could watch and learn.

All of this is to say, that when Cinder informed them that they'd be attending a monthly 'game night' at the Arc-Fall household, he'd said 'yes ma'am.' He understood how their arrangement worked.

What he was having trouble understanding, was his partner's trepidation upon approaching the door... and her unusual attire.

He shot her a sideways glance. "Em, it's July. Why are you wearing a sweater?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

His forehead creased. "Did something happen last week?"

"I. Don't. Want. To. Talk. About. It."

He sighed and knocked on the door. "Whatever."

Seconds later, another thing he didn't understand opened to door.

"Merc! Em! How you doing? Come on in!" Jaune greeted with grin, as he led them into his living room.

"We're doing good bro. It's been too long." He returned with a smile.

Jaune chuckled. "Yeah, but I get that you guys are busy. Cindy says you've got some kind of big job coming up."

"Yeah, it's uh, really going to change things around here."

Jaune shook his head. "You guys sure aim high. You still doing breakdancing?"

Mercury rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "Uh, not so much recently. Work, you know?"

Jaune tsked. "Man, you gotta make time for you. Like Em, she took up hiking recently."

He shot a look towards his partner, who was carefully studying the designs in the carpet, before responding.

"Hey bro, when you're right, you're right. I'll work on it. But enough about that boring shit, what are we playing tonight?"

Jaune smirked. "Risk, what else? I swear, Cindy's got a touch of megalomania."

Mercury chuckled nervously. "Man, can you imagine?"

The blond laughed with him. "Cindy? Never. You guys get comfortable, I'll go check on the big softy and get the snacks."

"Thanks bro!" Merc called as the Jaune made his way out of the room, before sighing and collapsing on the couch.

Emerald's eyes snapped over to him. "Isn't it weird?" She hissed.

He snorted. "Which part? The part where three of the most proficient killers in Remnant are meeting up to play board games? The part where they're the equivalent of a Beowolf being married to a golden retriever? Or the part where the retriever seems to be the one holding the leash?"

Emerald opened her mouth, closed it, then shook her head. "Well, all of that, but I meant how *normal* this has all become."

He shrugged. "Normal is a weird word for any of this, but I don't get why you're so upset. Jaune's cool... for being Jaune." He smirked at her. "Are you mad that mommy brought home a new daddy?" He waggled his eyebrows at her. "Or maybe, you wish he was your daddy?"

His eyes widened as Em's head whipped around the room in a panic.

He sat up excitedly. "Oh my Gods, there's a story here!"

She jammed a finger in his face. "Say that shit again, and I'll make you see *your* daddy in the buff, wherever you go."

He held up his hands in defeat. "Ok, ok, I was just curious!"

"Whatever." She huffed, before raising an eyebrow. "Anyway, breakdancing?"

He sighed. "Jaune caught me training one day. I had to tell him *something*, and I panicked."

She smirked. "And he believed you?"

He shook his head. "Did more than that. Got super excited and supportive about the whole thing. Signed me up for a competition that Big Daddy Bane was hosting."

"Big Daddy Bane the drug lord?" She asked incredulously.

"How many Big Daddy Banes do you know? And really, you have a hard time believing that Jaune makes weird friends?"

"How do they even know each other?"

He shrugged. "I think they're part of the same book club or something. 'Ninjas of Love,' or something like that."

She shook her head. "So how'd you get out of it?"

"I didn't." He answered flatly, causing her jaw to drop. "I *had* to go! He fucking showed up! He even had a handmade sign that said, 'YOU'RE GONNA GET MERC'D.'"

"... That's actually pretty good."

He laughed. "I know, right? I'm totally stealing it! Anyway, you want to know the craziest part? I won." He pointed a thumb at himself proudly. "You're looking at the three-time defending Vale breakdancing king."

She barked a laugh. "You kept going?"

"You know, we actually had a lot of fun, weird as that sounds. Jaune keeps coming out when he can." He shot her a look. "I don't know if you've ever had your own personal hype-man, but I *highly* recommend it. The dude is just always there for you, super supportive and... huh." He finished as his eyes widened in realization.

She cocked her head at him. "What?"

"I-I think I just realized that I wish Jaune was my dad."

She patted his shoulder as she took a seat beside him. "I'm here for you during this confusing time."

"Ok! I'm back, and I've got cookies!" Jaune announced triumphantly, as he returned with tray in hand.

"My man!" Mercury said, as he grabbed one before the tray even had the chance to touch the coffee table.

Emerald sighed. "He means, 'thank you. Jaune.'" She apologized, as she grabbed one of her own

"No problem, Em. How's the dating scene? Catch anything yet?"

She choked on her cookie, going into a coughing fit.

Jaune started patting her on the back. "Em, you ok? You need water?"

Mercury tsked. "She's fine, you just brought up a sore subject. I hear she got rejected recently." He finished with a grin, earning him a glare from the girl as she pounded on her chest.

The blond frowned and shook his head sadly. "Em, I'm not sure who this guy is, but he sounds dense."

"You have no idea." She grumbled.

Mercury smiled at Jaune. "Ignore the sour puss. Regale us with tales of how you wooed the boss."

The blond rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "Well, it's not really much of a story..."

"Pssh, are you kidding? No one has ever come close to bedding the boss lady before you, and you managed to make her settle down, there's got to be a story. Plus, maybe it'll help Em." He added, watching the young man's desire to help break him.

Jaune sighed. "Ok, ok, but only till Cindy gets here. She hates this story."

---

*Jaune Arc was a weak man.*

*He knew this. He'd failed to make into the school of his dreams. He'd failed to return home and face his family after. He'd failed to find steady work after that.*

*Jaune Arc was a weak man, it was known far and wide.*

*It was because he was such a weak man that he couldn't keep on walking when he saw her slumped over in the fetal position on the edge of the street, illuminated by the failing lights of the lamp posts in his rundown neighborhood. He'd never understood how the Vale natives could just keep on walking past someone in need. Maybe that made him weak, but he was ok with that.*

*He rushed over to her and placed a hand on her shoulder.*

*" Ma'am, are you-"*

*He pulled his hand back in shock, finding it slick with blood. A LOT of blood.*

*He turned her as gently as he could, rolling her on her back, revealing a series of deep cuts trailing down her arms and torso. He panicked, there was no other word for it. He should have called an ambulance, he should have called the police, he should have done something smart. What he did instead, was scoop her up in his arms and sprint towards his apartment, the medkit that he'd prepared for Beacon the only thing on mind.*

*Gods but she was light and frail. What kind of monsters would do this to a defenseless woman?*

*He bounded up the stairs three at a time, cursing as he fumbled with his keys, while trying not to jostle her too much.*

*Gods that was a lot of blood.*



*He dropped the keys and watched as they tumbled down the steps. He winced as his boot crashed into the door, forcing it open. Another thing he'd worry about later, when there was time for anything but her.*

*He set her down as gently as he could on the couch, before rushing to the closet and digging out his kit. He applied pressure and then the bandages with an ease that he silently thanked his father for drilling into them growing up, removing clothing as needed. Once the dressings were applied, he sighed and looked over her.*

*"What happened to you?" He whispered, before wiping his hands and pulling out his scroll, quickly dialing 911, letting out a yelp as the device exploded in his hand.*

*"Piece of shit!" He cursed, shaking the sting out of his hand.*

*"... no hospital." He heard a weak voice call out from behind him.*

*He whipped around, and saw a pair of bleary eyes staring at him. He fell to his knees in front of her.*

*"Are you ok?! Hey, we need to get you to a hospital, you need medical attention."*

*She struggled to rise. "T-they'll check the hospitals." She winced and collapsed again. "... not safe." She panted.*

*He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Hey, just relax, save you strength! I'm not gonna let anyone hurt you. Just stay right here, I'll get you some water."*

*He went to the kitchen and filled one of the two glasses he owned with water, before returning to find the girl fast asleep.*

*He shook his head and placed the glass on the water on the end table before laying out in front of the couch.*

*Jaune Arc was a weak man, but for tonight at least, he swore to be something more.*

---

*He woke with a start, looking around at his flat from his unfamiliar position on the floor. Why was he on the-*

*His head whipped around to find her, letting out a sigh of relief as he saw her chest rising and falling steadily. He pushed himself up to his knees and leaned over her. He made quick work of checking her bandages, shocked to find just how quickly she seemed to be recovering, before brushing the hair out of her face.*

*Gods, she's so beautiful-*

*He felt something sharp press into a VERY sensitive spot.*

*-And so very, very armed.*

*"Who are you?" She hissed, as her eyes popped open. "Where am I?"*

*"Jaune Arc! You're in my apartment! You're safe!" He yelped.*

*She scowled. "You live in the slums?"*

*He scoffed. "Hey, it's not that bad! It just needs some love."*

*"It needs to be burned down. How did I get here?" She asked, as she pressed the knife into his groin again.*

*He winced. "I brought you here after I found you in the street."*

*Her eyes shot around the room. "Was there anyone else?"*

*He shook his head vigorously. "Just you. You're safe, I promise, Arc's word. You kept saying something about Amber. Is she your friend? We can find her. That and maidens." He winced again. "Hey,*

*whatever happened, we can get you help, and it doesn't make you any less of a person."*

*Her brows knit together in confusion as she seemed to consider the impossibility that was him. "You're a strange man. Not too smart either." She decided finally.*

*He chuckled. "Ouch, coming from someone bleeding all over my couch, that stings."*

*She pulled the knife back and looked at the tattered couch beneath her. "You paid for this?"*

*" Well I-"*

*" It's hideous. Why didn't you put me on the bed?" Her eyes glanced about the room. "Where is the bed?"*

*He sighed. "You're on it."*

*She scoffed. "You're poor."*

*" Financially challenged with room for upward mobility." He corrected.*

*She snorted. "A LOT of room. What do you do?"*

*He shrugged. "A bit of this, a bit of that. Handyman, dog walker, part-timer..." He smirked. "... and now an nurse for pretty ladies."*

*She squinted at him. "Are you... flirting with me?"*

*" Maybe. How's it going?"*

*" You're very bad at it."*

*He chuckled. "That's about what I expected. Luckily, I'm better at making breakfast. Now, how do you like your eggs and toast?"*

*She considered him for a moment, before making some silent decision. "Scrambled and burnt."*

*He smiled at her. "Coming right up."*

*Jaune Arc was a weak man, but he didn't feel that way around her.*

---

"Aww weeee." Mercury cooed.

"And that's how he became my knight."

Jaune spun around in the living room, facing a hoodie and sweatpants clad Cinder.

"Baby! I was just-"

"That couch WAS hideous by the way."

He tsked. "Didn't scare you off."

She hummed. "Very little scares me dear."

He laughed. "Yeah, very little scares me anymore either, after watching you try to make eggs for the first time."

"Now, now, we all have our talents my knight." Her eyes snapped to Mercury. "It appears one of Mercury's is prying into others affairs. Trying to get a leg up on me, my old friend?"

He swallowed. "Nope, just uh... curious."

"Good, that's good. I'd hate to have to take your legs out from under you... again."

He slowly worked his mouth up and down as she stared him down.  
"-"

Jaune grabbed his wife by the waist and pulled her into a crushing hug, earning a yelp from the dark-haired beauty.

"Cindy! We promised no work talk at game night. Besides, everyone knows not mess with the 'big bad business woman.'"

She sighed and smiled up at him. "Of course my knight, you're right." She cast a glance at Mercury. "On both counts I believe."

He almost dislocated something he nodded so fast, before glaring at a snickering Emerald.

"You want to say something?" He hissed.

"Oh nothing, it's just a lot funnier from the outside."

"Emerald, dear." Cinder purred, causing the dark-skinned girl sit ramrod straight. "I love the sweater, it's very becoming on you."

"T-thank you!" The green-haired girl stammered.

Jaune tilted his head to the side. "Em, it's July. If you're hot, we can find you something that breathes a bit more."

"No! I mean, I'm not hot, definitely not! Everyone is breathing just fine, don't do anything!"

"She's still high strung." Jaune whispered to his wife.

She placed a hand on his cheek. "It's just who she is baby. Can you grab the wine? I forgot it."

He nodded. "Sure thing, be right back."

She waited till his footsteps faded before returning to the two of them. "Emerald, set up the game, I'm Mistral. Mercury, report."

He coughed and stood. "We've taken care of the rat, looks like a one off."

"Who was he talking to?"

"Dead men."

"Cute, that's not what I asked."

He shifted nervously. "Well we're still-"

She shifted her glance to his partner. "Emerald?"

She shot up, sending game pieces flying. "We're using Roman's contacts to find them."

"And if he's part of the problem?" The dark-haired woman growled.

"Who's part of the problem?" Three sets of eyes snapped over to the wine-bearing blond. "Are we talking about work again?"

Cinder tittered. "I'm sorry my knight, I couldn't help it. One of our new contractors is being... vexing."

"Oh, is it Sadam again?" He asked.

"No, this one is called... Broman."

"Broman? That's a weird name."

"Don't worry about it." Three voices chorused.

He shook his head and laughed as he opened the bottle and filled their glasses. "You guys are right, let's get to the game. Anyone claim Vale yet?"

"Not yet dear, not yet." Cinder promised darkly.

"All yours bro." Mercury hurriedly assured him.

---

Mercury was losing, and if there there was one thing he hated... well, other than his father, the police, Huntsmen, Emerald making him see shit, the color fushica, mimes... ok, so he hated a lot of shit, losing being among them.

Cinder was steadily eating into his Atlesian and Emerald's Vacuan forces, leaving Jaune's forces in Vale in peace. The irony was not lost on him.

They had to do something if they wanted to turn the tide. He looked to his partner, who gave him a silent nod. The agreement was made, a non-aggression pact until the more dangerous foe was removed. Just like always.

He made his decision.

"I'm going to attack Kuchinashi in Mistral." He announced.

"You won't." Cinder responded flatly.

"But I-"

Her eyes bore into his. "You won't, because you understand that such an action would be suicide. You'd be forgetting your place in the order of things Mercury, and I'd have to teach you it again." She leaned across the table. "And I'm a harsh teacher Mercury. I will start by teaching your tin soldiers the meaning of words such as 'fear' and 'desperation.' Then, once I find my way to your capital, and I will, I'll start teaching new lessons. Your citizens will know the meaning of 'pain' and 'hopelessness,' your children will learn the meaning of 'want' and 'hunger.' I would say that they'll tell stories of your fallen civilization as a warning to others in the future, but that would require me leaving enough for anyone to remember you at all." She finished the last of her wine. "So, Mercury, what is it that you want to do?"

He screamed silently for a moment, before his blond messiah saved him.

"Oooooookkkkk baby." Jaune drawled as he poured a healthy dose of wine into her empty glass. "I think you need a little bit more happy juice and a chill pill."

She blinked, as if waking from a spell. "Did I do the thing again?"

Jaune laughed. "I think Merc might have soiled himself."

He scoffed. Of course not... most likely not.

Cinder turned to the silver-haired man again. "Sorry Mercury. Did you decide what you're going to do?"

He made a new decision.

"I'm attacking Em!" He answered quickly, his voice shaking a bit more than he'd like.

"Asshole!"

"Good choice."

The next few turns devolved into a vicious civil war between him and Em. One in which he was sure she used her Semblance more than once, she could be vindictive like that. He sighed, and surveyed the board. He was getting desperate, and in his desperation, he risked it all.

"Jaune, can you be a bro and help a guy down on his luck?"

The blond chuckled. "And go against the missus? No thanks. Besides, I'm going to win here in a minute."

That caught Cinder's attention. She NEVER lost. "What was that dear?"

He shrugged and gestured to the board. "It wasn't too hard, I just had to pay attention to everyone's normal patterns." He nodded towards them. "Em and Merc fight like they normally do, so I didn't



have to worry about them, and you're always ready to take advantage of their confusion and disunity."

That was *shockingly* accurate.

"So, I just had to build up troops in Menagerie, that'll cut you off as you engage the two of them." He finished with a laugh.

The dark-haired woman scanned over the board, eyes widening in realization. She turned back to her husband, putting on her best scandalized look.

"My knight, you'd rout me from behind?"

The blond smirked and took a sip of his wine. "Well, it certainly wouldn't be the first time."

He'd been wrong. THAT was Cinder's best scandalized look.

"JAUNE ARC!" She roared, sending the man into a laughing fit.

Holy shit, she was blushing. He was pretty sure he could die happy now. He turned to Em, to find her jaw on the floor. It was too much, he broke down laughing.

"Hell yeah Jaune! Now help me out, bros before-"

Amber eyes snapped back to him, silencing him.

"What was that, Mercury?" She whispered dangerously.

"I-I, uh..." He looked Em for help, only to find her quickly scooting away from what she assumed would shortly become the 'splash zone.'

"Mercury." Cinder hissed. "Finish the sentence."

He could swear he could already *feel* the heat coming from across the table.

"What?" He tried weakly.

"The sentence, Mercury. Bros before *what*?"

Of all the ways he'd thought he'd go, he could safely say that he didn't expect it to be over a board game. Gods but it was getting hot. He could almost see the flickering flames-

"Holy shit!" Jaune cried out. "The game's on fire!"

His blond messiah. He jumped to help the man bat the flames out, carefully avoiding Cinder's gaze.

"It's monopoly all over again." Jaune muttered. "How does this keep happening?"

His dumb, incredibly dense, blond savior.

---

They'd said their goodbyes shortly after that, with Jaune apologizing for the panic, and assuring them that it has probably for the best anyway.

"Cindy seems like she needs a minute to cool off. See you guys next month right? She might not show it, but Cindy loves these things. I think it's an outlet for her aggression or something."

"Yeah, sure bro. Wouldn't miss it."

Cinder Fall was a monster, Mercury Black knew this. He also knew she wasn't one you refused, and he was pretty sure that that extended to her husband as well.

He sighed with relief as Jaune closed the door. Made it out alive.

"You're so fucking dumb." His partner offered helpfully.

"Shut the hell up Em."

"Oh, don't care about a 'hoe's' opinion?"

And so they walked back down the street, bickering the whole way, completely oblivious to the pair of pink and brown eyes watching them leave the monster's house.

---

## **Ship Builder**

A boy asked me. "Sir, why do you build ships?"

I scoffed. "Because, my father was a ship builder, as was his father before him, as far back as anyone can remember."

" But sir, your designs, they seem so... silly."

I placed a hand on his shoulder. "That is because you don't understand ships my boy."

" Will you teach me sir?"

I nodded. "Of course my boy. First, we must build our hull. It shall be shaped out of well constructed characters, ones that will stand firm in the face of the rough seas of fandom."

He nodded in understanding.

" Then, we shall find our mast, one that is an emotional center and connection between the characters, from which we will hang our sails of flirting and banter, which will carry us into the unknown. Sails that will be held firm by the ropes of sexual tension. Do you understand lad?"

" I believe so sir, but who is her captain?"

" Ah boy, that's where you don't understand the nature of ships. She will be set adrift aimlessly into the warring seas of fandom, and whatever poor wretches that find her as they drown in the bitter waters, why, they shall become her crew. They will climb

aboard her, they will man the oars and sails and drive her forward, they will stand ready at her cannons, defending her against all foes."

" To what purpose sir?"

I laughed merrily. "Why, to reach the next port my boy, what else?"

He nodded again. "I begin to comprehend sir. What happens when they reach the port?"

I shrugged. "I dunno, they'll probably burn this motherfucker down."

# New Friends

It's all madness Cr00cy

## Chapter 4

### New Friends

---

Cinder Fall was a monster.

Roman Torchwick knew this. He also knew that, as his mother so eloquently put it back in the day, she was not a woman to be fucked with. He knew this from firsthand experience, watching as a few of his men went up in literal flames after he told them to, 'get this bitch out of my way,' during their first meeting.

Better words could have been chosen. He could swear he could still smell them at times.

After that, they'd begun a mutually beneficial partnership, which is what his pride allowed him to call being allowed to live, so long as he carried out her every whim.

But things were about to change! Now, thanks to the little minx that was Neo, he knew one of his 'partner's' secrets, and as the former owner of one of Vale's oldest and most valuable manuscripts collections once told him, 'knowledge is power.' He'd made the counterargument that guns were power, and the owner had chosen to concede the debate.

He watched as the secret strolled casually along the street, not a care in the world. He looked down to his long-time partner.

"That him Neo?"

He received a happy bob of the head in return.

Well, time to do some old fashion investigation. "If you would be so kind my lady."

Neo tittered silently, as she wrapped them in a cloak of illusion, making them invisible to all those around them. A fun side effect he had discovered to this particular trick was the looks on people's faces when a ghost seemingly shoved them and told them to fuck off. It really was about the little joys in life.

They tailed the guy for around an hour, and as they did, something became disturbingly clear. The guy was connected.

Not the kind of connected like people who thought they were a big deal were, where a club owner or two knew your name, but *truly*, street level connected. The damn blond couldn't seem to take more than three steps before someone called out or ran up to him, offering him samples of food, flowers, or beer, and he knew them all *by name*.

*Fuck. This guy was connected AND liked.* Roman's mind raced, trying to figure out if he recognized him from somewhere. How would someone be operating in HIS city, and at such a deep level, without him knowing his name? It left a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. One that got worse when he saw who the man stopped to talk to next.

Big Daddy Bane was so named because he was fucking big. The man must have been at least 6'5", if not taller, and was a veritable wall of muscle. He WAS East side drug trade, and had the firepower to keep it that way. He was always dressed in the tackiest white suit Roman had ever seen, there was an art to suits after all, but he dared someone to say it to his face. Nobody that wanted to stay breathing very long ran their mouth to Big Daddy. But now? The man looked positively nervous.

*Who the hell is this guy!?*

"Hey Bane! How's it going?" The blond greeted cheerily.

Roman took note of that, no 'Big Daddy,' no title. He had the power in this relationship.

The giant shuffled nervously, pulling at the collar of his shirt. "Fine, just fine Jaune. How are you?"

*Jaune. So, that's his name, huh?*

The blond nodded. "Doing good!" He leaned in and grinned at the larger man. "How's the book? You all caught up?"

His eyes widened. This guy was shaking down Bane!

Bane's shoulders slumped as he stared at the ground. "No." He sighed.

Jaune tsked. "This is the second week in a row!"

"I know, I know, I just need a little bit more time!" The mountain of a man begged.

This was bad, real bad. Big Daddy controlled a significant amount of the city's less-than-legal gambling operations in addition to the drug trade. If this guy not only had access to his books, but was able to take money from the man, he was a force to be reckoned with. Roman leaned in, anxious to see how the newcomer handled failure.

The young man laughed. "Hey, don't worry about it! I know you'll get all caught up before next week. I trust you."

Roman felt a chill run down his spine. Of all the reactions that he'd expected, that definitely wasn't one of them. To be so forgiving, to have the power to be so forgiving, was a powerful message. It meant that the money didn't matter to him, it was just a token of submission, and he could continue operations... with or without Big Daddy. And that last line? 'I trust you.' That spoke volumes. He wasn't worried about Bane going anywhere, because there was nowhere to run.

The giant let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks for understanding."

"Of course. You have any more tournaments coming up? I'm trying to get Merc back out there."

*Dammit! He was into the underground fight circuit too? How vast was this asshole's reach!?*

He growled as he motioned for Neo to follow him back down the street into an alley. He had one more source he wanted to check before he unleashed the big guns. He pulled out his scroll and hurriedly dialed the familiar number, tapping his foot impatiently as it rang. A man with dark hair and a beard answered the phone a few moments later.

"What do you want Roman?"

He tsked. "Hey to you too Junior. I need information on a Jaune."

"Roman, you know we have a policy against kissing and telling."

He rolled his eyes. "Not that kind of John you idiot, a guy named Jaune. Tall, young, blond hair."

The man hummed. "Yeah, I know him."

"And?"

"What's it worth to you?"

He groaned. "What do you want?"

"The city cops are starting to sniff around again..."

"I'll take care of it. Jaune. Now."

He large man sighed. "Not much to tell honestly. He's a good guy, friends with the girls. Did freelance work taking care of some leaks and rats for us a while back."



*Shit, the guy had gotten his hands dirty? That made him even more dangerous.*

"How long ago, and for how long?"

Junior stroked his chin. "Over a year ago for sure. He wasn't at it for too long, maybe six months to a year?"

*Damn it! Who rose through the ranks that fast? Soldier to don in a few years? This was bad, real bad.*

"Why are you asking after Jaune anyway? He's a friend of the-."

*Shit.*

"Thanks Junior." He cut the man off as he hung up the phone.

Who didn't this Jaune have in his pocket? He turned to the one reliable source of info he had.

"Neo, you're sure you saw this guy at the house that Cinder was at?"

She nodded.

"And the two brats left before he did?"

She signed at him.

"What do you mean 'he didn't leave?' What was he doing there?"

She shrugged, tapped her finger on her chin in thought, then lit up.

"Got something?"

She nodded excitedly, then made a circle with her index finger and thumb on one hand, and began thrusting the index finger of her other hand through vigorously.

He rolled his eyes. "If he's banging the fire bitch, then I'll eat my damn hat."

She grinned evilly at that.

"Find that shit funny do you? Well, why don't you go find out for us? There's an ice cream sundae in it for you if you find anything good."

Her eyes widened in delight, before she shot him a thumbs up, and seemingly blinked out of existence.

*Well mystery man, let's see if you can handle Neo.*

---

Neo was a Monster.

She knew this. She'd certainly been told it enough. Usually by someone whose eyes were wide with fear and screaming at the top of their lungs. Fond of labels, were the soon to be deceased. In truth though, she'd suspected it sometime much earlier on in her life. There'd been other monsters back then, ones that decided to prey on her. She'd decided she didn't like that, not at all. Several corpses later, she'd established a mental hierarchy of sorts. There were monsters, and then there were Monsters.

And Neo? She was a Monster.

However, she was a Monster that enjoyed being entertained. Roman was entertaining, and one of the few people that weren't openly terrified of her. So, she'd adopted him. She was pretty sure he thought it was the other way around, but he could get confused like that. They had a well defined relationship, he provided the entertainment, and she fought off all the would be monsters. It had worked out perfectly so far.

Which is why it was so frustrating when Fire Bitch had sashayed her way into their lives.

Fire Bitch was a Monster, one that she begrudgingly admitted was deserving of a big-ass "M," and it made Neo nervous. She HATED being nervous.

So now, with the chance to strike back at the woman in sight? Neo was ecstatic. All she had to do was pump this guy for information. And if there was one thing that she was good at, it was pumping... wait, nope. She was good at getting people to talk... ironically.

She found him chatting up a balding old man, selling cabbages of all things, at a street stall. She was far more interesting than cabbages in her not-so-humble opinion, so this should be easy. Just waltz up, flash a smile, maybe flash a little more, get Blondie to start talking. Easy peas-

"Oh Gods, it's you!"

Or, the cabbage-man could recognize her, that could happen too. Did they really shake this guy down recently? Times really were lean around here. She mentally shrugged. Oh well, time for option 2 - intimidation.

Blondie looked back and forth between her and the cabbage-man, clearly confused.

"Friend of yours?" He asked the cabbage-man.

That was her cue. She gracefully hopped up onto the counter of the stall and leered at the owner, a wicked smile on her lips.

*Yes cabbage-man, tell him who I am.*

The man was sweating bullets, eyes frantically searching for an exit from the situation. He licked his lips nervously.

"I-I uh..." He trailed off as she leaned in, her smile widening.

Then something happened that caught her off guard. Blondie laughed. Not a fake laugh, a nervous laugh, but a full on, belly laugh.

"So, this is the competition, huh? I'd worried if I were you Thomas, she seems feisty, and no offense, but she's a lot better looking than you."

The cabbage-man stared at Blondie with eyes wide with fear, but the man's grin held. He wasn't intimidated in the slightest. This man wasn't afraid of monsters, or at least pretended not to be... that made him interesting.

Blondie turned his gaze to her, chuckling as he held out a hand. "Name's Jaune Arc. Short, sweet, rolls of the tongue, ladies love it."

She stared at his hand in shock for a minute, before signing at him sarcastically.

'Do they though?'

'Sorry, force of habit.'

Her eyes widened as his hands moved through the signs. He caught her surprise and laughed.

"Something me and my sisters used to do for fun. Comes in handy." He winked at her as threw out the pun.

Ok, scratch that, Blondie had just moved up from interesting to entertaining. That was rare air.

She clapped her hands together in excitement. Back to option 1 it was!

She hopped off the counter of the stand and leaned into him, smirking in appreciation at his boldness, as she entered what people kept telling her was considered their 'personal space.' It didn't make much sense to her, she always found it much easier to get personal once you were inside that space.

He chuckled as her looked down at her. "Like that one? You'd be one of the first."

Oh, she intended to be. Gods he was tall. That's ok, the height difference tended to matter less when you weren't vertical anymore.

"Cindy hates puns. Or at least she says she does." He leaned a bit closer and whispered conspiratorially. "I think she's secretly a fan."

Cindy? That reminded her of something. Was she supposed to be doing something? Probably wasn't important. What was important, was that he was talking about another girl. She threw him a pout to show him what she thought about that.

He laughed again. "Wow, now you really remind me of her."

Playing hard to get, huh? Well, she could take care of that. She wrapped them in her Semblance as she reached for the top button of her blouse. Time for a very public, private show.

She wasn't sure what surprised her most out of what happened next. It might be the speed at which his hand shot out and caught her wrist, it might be how gentle but firm his grip was, it very well could have been the genuine apology in his eyes when he spoke.

"I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean-" He shook his head and held up his left hand, ring proudly in place. "I'm married."

But, what she was almost certain surprised her most, was the viper that suddenly appeared at the end of the man's wrist and struck out at her, sending her flying back onto her rear. She reached for her blade, but the viper had been replaced by a familiar face. A very annoying familiar face.

Crop-top stood beside Blondie, looking down at her and trying to be intimidating. As if, Crop-top has a little "m" monster for sure. A clam-jamming little "m" monster at that.

"Are you ok, Jaune?" She asked.

He looked confused. "Yeah, of course Em." His eyes shot back to her. "Are *you* ok? Did you hurt yourself?"

Her eyes flicked better the two, and suddenly the pieces fell into place. The ring, Crop-top, Cindy. Her eyes widened. He really *wasn't* afraid of Monsters.

He was VERY entertaining.

Blondie offered her a hand up, which she accepted. "Sorry about that Neo, this is Em-"

"We know each other." Crop-top cut him off.

He tilted his head. "Hiking buddies?"

*Hiking buddies?*

Crop-top snorted. "No, Neo's more of a mime enthusiast."

*Oh this bitch.*

He hummed. "I guess I can see it." He snapped his fingers in excitement. "Hey, I've got an idea! Neo's single too, and looking to meet some guys. You two should go clubbing together, make new friends."

Trying to make alliances, huh? That was Roman's thing, she wouldn't be caught dead with Crop-top.

The tanned girl frowned in agreement. "I don't think we'd get along. Neo always likes putting on more of a show than I do."

And with that, Neo was naked. Well, she wasn't really, but that's what Crop-top wanted her to see.

*Oh this very dead bitch. She wanted to play rough? Ok then, she'd give her a show .* She cloaked the two of them in her Semblance, hiding them from the rest of the world, and cracked her knuckles.

Jaune stared between the still image of the two girls staring each other down and tsked. "Em, be nice."

"I'll be nice Jaune, I promise." Crop-top said slowly, trying to keep up a strong front as Neo approached. "Can you go find Merc? He's back down the way I came, looking for you."

The blond sighed as he started back down the street. "Fine, just make sure everyone stays in one piece."

*No promises Blondie.*

---

Roman watched as the blond haired man peeled off from the two girls, hearing his last minute instructions to keep the battle contained. As much as he hated to admit it, the guy was smart. He knew he couldn't keep two wild cards like Neo and Emerald contained, so he'd let them have their spat, so long as it didn't disrupt business.

It was exactly what he would have done.

He growled as he watched the man walk back down towards the direction of Cinder's other, silver haired dog. He was tired of being a spectator. He was tired of listening to how much everyone liked this guy on the street. Of how he was making moves on HIS territory. It was time for a face to face.

"Hey Jaune!" He called out, causing the blond to whip around with a confused look on his face. Good, he was off balance.

The blond squinted. "Do I know you?"

Roman grit his teeth. This blond bastard, pretending that he didn't know *exactly* who he was talking to!

He reeled himself in. He had to play this cool. He laughed and held out a hand as he approached. "Maybe not. I'm Roman Torchwick,

and this is MY street." *AND my city.*

The blond considered him for a moment. "Are you sure?" He pointed down the way. "That corner belongs to Bane." His finger shifted. "That stall to Thomas." Again the finger moved. "That-"

"Yes, I suppose that's *technically* true." This bastard wanted to play hardball, huh? "But, I'm something of an entrepreneur around here. Most of these businesses work through me... if they want to remain profitable." Time to play his card. "I believe we have a mutual acquaintance by the way, one with a fiery temper."

He watched as the blond's eyes widened in realization that his secret was out, that he'd been-

"Broman!" The man cried out excitedly. "That's who you are!"

*What?*

"What?"

The blond laughed. "Oh, sorry about that, Cindy's told me about you, but I've never seen a picture."

"I, uh-"

Jaune clapped the man on the shoulder. "Sorry about Cindy, she can be a handful."

He had so many questions . Broman? Cindy? Was this guy touching him?

The blond leaned in with a smile. "But just between me and you, I hear you've been giving her trouble too. Do her husband a favor and try to get along, huh? You know... be a bro."

He seethed. This son of a bitch thought he could big-time him on his own street?



His grip tightened on his cane. He'd show him how Roman Torchwick had risen through the ranks. Then it hit him-

Her husband?

His eyes widened. This guy was *married* to the fire bitch? More than that, if he'd never even met the guy, did that make him the power behind the throne?

His eyes shifted from the blond's easy smile to look around the street. There were people staring at them. There were people staring at them with *fear* in their eyes. Roman felt a chill run down his spine as the man squeezed his shoulder.

"Can you do that for me, Broman?"

He swallowed. "I-"

"Jaune?" The man shifted his attention to the silver haired newcomer approaching them.

"Merc! How's it going man? I was just talking to our friend Broman!"

The mercenary's eyes darted between the two. "... Yeah, Broman."

Roman's heart sank as it all became clear. He hadn't wanted this conversation - Jaune had. It's why he'd had Emerald pair off with Neo. It's why he'd walked down the street in broad daylight, just asking for him to make his move. He'd had Mercury waiting in the wings the whole time. Now he was outnumbered on a street that may or may not be his anymore.

*Fuck.*

He let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding as Neo joined them, popping into existence. His eyes flicked up to the blond. The bastard didn't even have the decency to look surprised.

"Oh hey Neo! Didn't see you come up. You and Em sort things out?"

His partner gave the man a happy nod.

Jaune smiled. "Good. I'm glad we can all be friends."

Roman glanced to the side as Emerald shuffled up to them, an obvious hitch in her step.

"You ok Em?" The blond asked.

*Did nothing shake this guy?*

"Yeah." She huffed. "Must've pulled something hiking."

*Hiking?*

He didn't have time to think about it, as the two warriors took their places at Jaune's side, leaning into him, making sure that he understood what would happen with a word from the blond.

He shuffled nervously. He didn't want this fight, not now at least. There were just too many unanswered questions. Thankfully, Mercury saved him.

"Jaune, I think we need to go bro. Cinder wanted to talk to you."

The man nodded to his lieutenant, before turning back to Roman.

"Sorry we didn't get more of a chance to talk, but you know how it is. Can't keep a pretty lady waiting." Jaune finished with a wink.

*A wink. He fucking winked at him.*

He nodded back slowly. "Yeah... we'll catch up some other time."

The blond smiled warmly, too warmly. "I look forward to it. And please, remember what I said."

Roman tried to keep his knees from shaking till the man had turned and started down the street.

Neo was watching a much different scene play out.

She'd rushed back to Roman as soon as she'd finished teaching Crop-top all about the differences between big "M's" and little "m's." She'd found him cornered by Blondie and Stilts, looking shook.

She thought she could understand, Blondie wasn't an everyday kinda guy. He was dangerous.

At least, that's was she'd thought before she'd seen the way that Crop-top and Stilts closed in on him. To Roman, she'd imagined it looked like they were closing ranks. But to her, someone who read body language as a way of life? She saw something else. They were *afraid* for him. They were protecting him.

None of it made any sense. Was Blondie not afraid of Monsters, or did he not even see them?

She started laughing as they walked away, she couldn't help it, Blondie was just too entertaining.

Roman shot her a worried look, and she smiled up at him. Sure, she could tell him, but...

What would be the fun in that?

---

## **All Aboard**

**I pull the boy, coughing and sputtering, over the side with me. We collapse to the deck, fighting for breath.**

**His eyes dart around in a panic as he takes in his surroundings. "W-where are we sir?"**

**I laugh. "Why, on the ship, of course."**

**His brow wrinkles in confusion. "But... this is not the ship that I thought I wanted."**

I smile and clap him on the shoulder. "You still don't understand the nature of ships. You don't choose a ship, not really. It chooses you, it speaks to your heart lad."

The boy shook his head. "My heart wants weird things."

I chuckled at that. "Don't all of ours?"

His gaze travels to the rail, and the motley crew pulling themselves aboard. "Who are they sir?"

" Why, they are the crew! The poor wretches."

" They have strange names set upon them sir."

" Aye boy, don't we all? Those are their sailor names."

" What brings them to the ship?"

I shoot the boy a smile. "The siren song of Crack my boy. Look at how they shed their old colors, at least for a moment. There is a shield of the WhiteKnights, there a lance of a Dragonslayer, and there a cloak of Lancaster."

The boy gives me a quizzical look. "But sir, can Crack alone sustain them?"

" Ah lad, there is wisdom in your words. That is why we have an edit-er, I mean a quartermaster." I point to a tired and patient man. "This man here! Crooc, of the house of Ee! He has served with me on every ship I have ever made. He will ensure that we dole out the meat of the story and the wine of wit in equal measure. Too much of either, and the crew will become sick."

" I understand sir. What of these men?" He ask, pointing.

" Ah there be our navigator, Mr. Burk, he will ensure that our course remains constant and true. And there, that grave sailor

is our cannoneer, he will defend the ship against all attacks, lest we Fall in the Knight."

I wait for the boy's mirth to overtake him. "Do you get it lad? It's a-"

" Perhaps you should save your puns for your other ship sir."

" Aye boy, mayhaps so." My eyes dart upwards. "Ah, see there boy, up on the ropes? The bear of black and white and the amorous father check our sails and ropes, ensuring that our banter and sexual tension are on point, and will continue to propel us forward. And Demy, up in the crow's nest? He sees things before anyone save for Crooc, and keeps us from crashing atop the rocks of poor storytelling."

The boy's eyes snap to a stern and commanding figure as he approaches the helm, his gaze constantly inspecting the ship with every step.

" Who is that man sir?"

" That be our captain lad. A man so dedicated to the ships of the noodleboi that he took on noodle as his name."

" He frightens me sir."

I nod. "Aye, I suppose he is a mite spooky. He will lead the judgement of the ship as it sails."

The boy turns to me. "What if it is found wanting?"

I hum. "Then I imagine I shall be hung from the mast of public opinion."

The boy's eyes widen in shock. "No sir!"

I tussle his hair. "We are a far way from that yet. Look, we begin to sail!"

**The boy scowls again in confusion. "Sir, those are storm clouds on the horizon."**

**" Aye boy, that they are."**

**" But sir, we sail into them."**

**I allow myself a dark chuckle. "There be no other place to test ships but the storm, lad."**

# Date Night

Cr00cy, what are we doing with our lives?

## Chapter 5

### Date Night

---

Cinder Fall was a Monster.

She knew this. But sometimes, she liked to forget.

Her current situation made that somewhat difficult. She 'sat' at an illusionary table, projected by some strange new Grimm, surrounded by Salem's other lieutenants, tapping her foot impatiently. She had places to be. She was going to be late... again.

"Are we boring you Cinder?" Watts drawled from across the table... the smug bastard.

"Only you Watts." She shot back.

He hummed. "Perhaps you have better things to do? Like fail to obtain a Maiden's powers?"

"I forgot you were so accomplished in that regard. Honestly, I forget most of your accomplishments... it's almost like there's a distinct lack of them."

"Oooohhh, sick burn!" Tyrion grinned from across the table, before erupting in laughter at his own pun.

*Gods I hate puns.* Jaune was the only exception to this rule. Jaune was the only exception to several rules.

Watts scoffed. "At least I'm not behind schedule."

She raised an eyebrow. "Good for you. I suppose that makes two of us then."

He balked. "But, I thought-"

"Best to leave the thinking to others dear, you know it got you kicked out of Atlas."

"You bitch!" He snarled.

"Children." A soft, but terrifying voice cut them off. Cinder's heart pounded within her chest as Salem coolly glanced over them. She may have been a Monster, but she was pretty sure that woman was the Devil.

"There's no need to bicker. It's unproductive, and I abhor the unproductive." Her gaze fell to Cinder. "Now my young friend, why don't you tell me about your recent success?"

She straightened in her chair. "My Queen, the man I employ, Roman, has succeed in matching our quotas, despite the earlier delays."

The red-eyed woman nodded in appreciation. "Good. How did this come to be?"

"He's been unusually motivated since last week my Queen. He seems to be afraid of what will happen if fails me. Fails you." She quickly corrected.

Salem hummed. "Fear that I'm sure you put there. Excellent work Cinder, you prove your worth yet again."

"Thank you, my Queen."

"You do seem hurried through my dear. What has you in such a rush?"

She swallowed. "I have an important meeting with a partner that I can't afford to miss... again"



The ghostly woman nodded slowly. "Very well, you are excused my dear."

"Thank you my-"

"But remember this, I will not tolerate failure. The clock is ticking, my dark Maiden."

Her eyes met the floor as she bowed her head. "Of course my Queen."

With a simple wave of her hand, Salem cut the feed.

Cinder let out a sigh of relief. She couldn't be late again...

Date night was too important, and it was her turn to set it up.

She heard two knocks come from the door behind her.

"Enter." She quickly responded, spinning around in her chair to see Emerald enter, a nervous look on her face and a bundle in her arms. "What's our status?" She demanded.

"Promise you won't get mad?"

She shot her subordinate a look. "Emerald, let's be realistic."

The green haired girl sighed. "I found a 5-star restaurant on a few hours notice..."

"Excellent." She was a woman with standards after all. Jaune could pick a greasy spoon when it was his turn.

"... And it's Big Daddy Bane's."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"Emerald, do you think that Mercury will be able to identify you at the morgue? What with all the burns I mean."

"You gave me an hour! Because you forgot!" The girl complained.

She huffed. "I never forget, I just become distracted."

She could have sworn Emerald rolled her eyes at that. Maybe discipline was becoming an issue in their little unit. "Big Daddy is the only one that'd give us a reservation, and that's because he likes Jaune. Besides, Jaune will be ecstatic that he gets to visit his friend."

Well, that was true she supposed. Though, she'd prefer to have his full attention.

She sighed. "Very well. What of the rest of the evening?"

"You're going to see a movie."

She hummed. "Trite, but classic." Her eyes widened. "It's not a dog movie is it? Jaune was bawling at the one where the dog reincarnates over and over again." SHE hadn't cried. She'd simply had an allergic reaction to Vale's pollens. Gods but that dog reminded her of Jaune.

Emerald winced. "No... it's a Spruce Willis movie."

She groaned. "Do you hate me Emerald?"

"Jaune loves Spruce Willis!" She comforted. "It's his favorite!"

"My husband has terrible taste."

"You're preaching to the choir sister." Emerald muttered under her breath.

"What was that?"

The tanned girl snapped to attention. "I said I've got Mercury keeping Jaune distracted!"

"Good, what are they doing?"

"Um... playing catch." The girl said slowly.

That caught her attention. "The children's game?"

Emerald shrugged. "Merc's been weirdly insistent on playing it with Jaune for some reason. Something about making up for lost time."

She sighed. "Well, I suppose it's not his emotional stability I picked him for. Do I have a dress?"

"Yes." The girl beamed as she unwrapped the package in her arms, revealing an elegant black dress. "What do you think?"

Her eyes flowed over the dress as she reached out to caress the fabric. "It's perfect."

"Thought you'd like it." Emerald stated proudly as she handed the dress over, waiting as she changed.

"How do I look?" She asked, giving a small spin and allowing the other girl to zip her up.

"You're going to knock him dead... metaphorically speaking of course." The green haired girl quickly amended.

She smiled to herself. "Excellent. Let's go then."

"Boss, wait." Emerald instructed, holding out one hand in front of her, as her other one fished in her pocket, emerging with a small gold ring. "Can't forget this."

She let out a sigh of relief as she slid it onto her hand. It wouldn't do to show up under-dressed.

"Thank you Emerald, you're a good friend."

The girl lit up. "Wow, thank you-"

"Despite your sexual attraction to my husband."

She almost chuckled as the girl's face fell.

"I know it must of been hard for you." She continued. "Setting up what you might have imagined could have been your dream date with him. Maybe I will allow you to join us one night. For a birthday perhaps."

Emerald scowled. "His or mine? Who's this supposed to be a reward for?"

Her brow creased. "You have a birthday? Since when?"

The green haired girl sighed. "Since Jaune gave me one. Remember how upset he got when he found out that I didn't know when mine was? He demanded that we find a date. He chose May 10th, said that May was the month of Emeralds, and that-

"-You were a ten." She tsked. "Yes, remarkably corny is my husband."

"It was kinda sweet."

"Yes, he is." She smirked. "I noticed you didn't say no."

The girl colored. "I-I.."

She couldn't hold it in any longer, she began to snicker.

Emerald's eyes widened. "You're screwing with me!"

She was, wasn't she? She never used to play such games, not before Jaune. She couldn't figure out why for the life of her. It was a lot of fun.

"Well... not yet at least." She drawled.

The girl's jaw hit the floor.

Perhaps puns were permissible from time to time.

---

She felt a flutter in her stomach when she saw him standing at the entrance of the restaurant. There was nothing she could do to stop it, nor did she want to. He looked good.

He'd combed his hair, that was the first thing she'd noticed. The second was that he'd dressed for the occasion. Dark slacks led up to a white shirt, covered by a blue sports coat that she thought brought out his eyes. He'd even ditched those ridiculous boots that he always wore around. She knew he didn't like getting dressed up, his dates were always more adventurous, but he'd done it for her. It was one of the reasons she loved him.

"Gods you're beautiful."

That was another.

"My, my Mr. Arc, starting the smooth talk already?"

He grinned and held his arm out to her. "What can I say? I see a pretty lady, and I'm feeling lucky tonight."

She smiled back. "Think she's interested?"

"I'll let you know after dinner." He said as he held the door open for her, leading her inside.

His face lit up when he saw who was manning the reception counter, and she internally sighed.

*Here we go.*

"Bane! How's it going, you old dog!"

The giant exploded in a laugh. "Jaune! Welcome! Who is this beautiful creature? Is this your mysterious wife I've heard so much about?"

She tsked at that. This low level dealer had no need to know of her existence, that was reserved for necessary evils - and wasn't there irony in that - like Roman. Still... it was nice to hear he talked about her.

"Yep, the one and only."

She'd better be.

The giant smirked and nudged Jaune with his elbow. "I can see why you're so interested in our book club, you need ideas. Might I recommend Book 4, Chapter 7, Scene 3?"

She wasn't sure exactly what he was talking about, but from the way Jaune blushed, she could imagine.

"I assure you that my husband and I have active imaginations, thank you."

Bane raised an eyebrow. "Fiery, isn't she?"

Jaune chuckled. "You have no idea."

The man laughed and clapped his hands together. "What brings you to our humble establishment?"

Her husband snorted. "Bane, if this is humble, I'm in trouble." He nodded towards her with a smile. "It's date night."

"Date night! Well then, we can't have you sit at an ordinary table, only the finest will do!" The giant turned and called to a hostess. "Coco! Take these fine people up to balcony, and see that they recieve a bottle of our finest."

"Sure thing boss."

Cinder took in the young girl carefully, taking in her appearance and peering at Jaune for his reaction. She was certainly pretty enough, and she was forced to admit, not without a sense of fashion. But

Jaune stared obliviously forward as the girl led them to their table, not giving her more than a passing glance.

*Good.*

It wasn't that she didn't trust Jaune. The man was loyal to a fault. But what she didn't trust, was literally any other human being alive. Experience had taught her that this was a wise choice. But, it didn't look like she'd have to worry about this one, who informed them that their server would be by shortly to take their order.

Jaune leaned across the table. "This is nice!"

She smiled. "I thought you'd like it. I spent a while picking it out." She'd 'hired' Emerald, so it counted.

He chuckled. "You know me too well. Also, tell Em I said thank you."

She balked. "How'd you know?"

He grinned. "I didn't. So, what'd she plan for us after this?"

She huffed. "Well, maybe nothing if you're going to be this insufferable."

"Awww, I was just teasing you. I wanna know!"

"I suppose it'll just have to be a surprise." It'd certainly been a surprise to her, not an hour before.

"You're mean." He joked.

"You have no-"

"Hi, I'm Velvet, I'll be your server."

Cinder's gaze flickered over to the young faunus girl. Ok, this? This could be a problem. If there was something she'd learned about her knight, it was that he had a weakness for ears. She had a pair in

their closet at home, that looked suspiciously like the ones atop this girl's head, that proved this to be true.

Her husband addressed the walking fetish. "Hey Velvet, how are-"

"Say the line!" They heard Bane boom from across the restaurant.

She watched as the homewrecker sighed, her eyes finding the floor, before issuing 'the line.'

"Welcome to Big Daddy's... home of the Big D." She muttered.

"More enthusiasm!" Bane shouted.

"What's the Big D?" Jaune asked.

That was for her to know, and this flop-eared floozy to never find out.

"It's our specialty cocktail." The sex symbol explained.

"We'll take two." Jaune decided proudly.

The girl visibly cringed.

"So help me Velvet, you WILL ask the question!" Bane demanded.

She was honestly impressed with how small the tramp managed to make herself.

"May..." She swallowed. "May I inquire as to the size of your D?"

She was definitely going to kill Emerald.

"The biggest. We're not driving." Jaune said with otherworldly confidence.

She'd do something respectful with the ashes, like throw them in the face of an orphan. Emerald would like that.



"I'll be back in just a minute." The nightwalker assured them, before practically bolting off.

"She seems nervous. Wonder if she's new?" Her knight observed.

She was NOT talking about Ms. Risque Rabbit on date night. She scooted her chair closer to his, until they were side by side. Her hand... explored.

"I'm not new, does that make me less exciting?"

He yelped, and she smirked. The night was back on track. Nothing could stop her now.

He laughed. "The moment I stop finding you exciting, I doubt I'll have a pulse."

That was probably truer than he knew.

"Good." She purred. "I think I might have an alteration to date night plans."

He raised an excited eyebrow. "Yeah?"

"Yes, what say we-"

A drink was placed before her. A gaudy, ridiculous drink that was both the color blue, and in a 'D' shaped glass. She turned to tell the hoppy hooker that they'd be needing the check, and froze. Gone was the Velveteen Vixen, and in her place, something inexplicably worse.

Di-chromatic eyes winked back at her as the pink and brown girl passed Jaune his drink.

A flood of questions flowed through her mind. How? Why? Where was what's-her-name? Where would she hide this bitch's body?

"Oh hey Neo! Didn't know you worked here." Oh Gods, it got worse. How did Jaune know this harlot? Why was she staring him down like

he was prey?

"You know each other?" She asked carefully.

"Huh? Oh yeah! Met her the other day when I ran into Broman. Nice guy by the way. I think she's in the same boat as Emerald." He whispered the last to her.

That was a very dangerous, very flammable boat to be in.

"You don't say? You know, I think I have to use the bathroom Jaune. I'm sure Neo will accompany me. You know, girls and bathrooms and all that." She said as she found her feet.

Neo promptly fell into her seat, and waved up at her, bidding her farewell.

Jaune chuckled nervously. "She's something else, right?"

She was about to be something else. Something much more on fire.

"I think maybe she gets nervous around people. Like she's shy."

Neo grinned at that.

"I don't think so baby."

"Has anyone seen Velvet?" Bane shouted over the crowd.

"I think I saw her taking a nap in back." Coco shouted back. "She was out of it, had to make sure she was still alive."

"That girl is killing me!"

Neo shifted nervously in her seat. HER seat.

"Oh look, something's bothering the girl. We should let her go Jaune, no reason to hold her here."

Here? No. An unregistered building by the docks in Vale, where they'd have a chance to 'talk' in more depth? Certainly.

"Well yeah, Neo, we don't want to... Neo? Where'd she go?" The love of her life looked around in confusion. "How does she keep doing that?" The dense as depleted uranium, love of her life.

---

They'd finished the rest of their dinner without any additional incident, as a waiter named Russell took over their table. Russell was decidedly non-threatening, even if it looked like he might swing that way.

She'd considered skipping the movie altogether, and simply heading home with Jaune. She was fairly certain that she could provide a bigger climax than this Spruce Willis character after all. But she'd made the mistake of letting it slip that they had tickets. The way Jaune had lit up at the news had resigned her to watching this disaster with him. At least it didn't have dogs.

"Man babe, can't believe you decided to take us to the premier, I thought you hated these." Jaune said, as he practically skipped down the road.

"They're... interesting." She lied.

"I hear his partner's a dog in this one. What's the title again? Old dogs die hard?"

She was going to burn down an orphanage with Emerald inside it.

"Oh shit, we're going to be late! Let's cut down this alley."

That would normally sound like a remarkably poor choice, but... she was who she was. She rolled her eyes good naturedly and followed her husband.

Her first indication that something was wrong was Jaune's hand pushing her back, carefully corralling her behind him. The second was the voice that spoke from the darkness.

"Well, what do we have here?"

*No.*

"Looks like a pretty boy and his pretty bird."

*No.*

"We don't want any trouble." Jaune said carefully.

"Well, see the thing is, we kinda do. Isn't that right Jimmy?"

"Might want more than that."

No. This happened to other people. She'd ensured that when she'd sold her soul. She was invincible.

"Stay behind me." Jaune whispered, slowly stepping forward.

Jaune wasn't invincible though.

"Oh? Looks like the pretty boy wants to scrap."

"Well, we can take care of that pretty problem for him."

Jaune raised his fist and fell into an approximation of a fighting stance.

Her husband was many things. He was unreservedly kind, he was incredibly thoughtful, he was a good person, but...

He was not a fighter.

She cringed as the first blow found his cheek, whipping his head around. He made to swing in return, but the second man was

already upon him, driving his fist into his ribs.

She was impossibly and excruciatingly paralyzed. To act was to reveal herself, and lose Jaune. To not act was lose Jaune still.

"Come on boy, thought you were a big man?" Jimmy taunted, as he drove a knee into Jaune, sending him to the ground.

She burned their faces into her memory. They were wearing colors, they were part of a gang.

Jaune struggled to his feet, and raised his fists again.

"Looks like he's still got some fight left Bob."

"Let's beat it out of him."

The next few minutes were an agony that she'd never experienced before. Over and over again they knocked him to the ground, their fists finding his face and their boots finding his ribs. And yet, over and over again, he stumbled to his feet, always circling in front of her, always trying to protect HER.

*Just stay down* . She mentally pleaded.

Bob shook his head sadly as Jaune rose again. "I don't think he gets it Jimmy."

A knife appeared in Jimmy's hand. "That's ok Bob, I'm a good teacher."

*Enough.*

Flames erupted into her hand.

*No more.*

Jaune coughed, blood splattering onto the concrete. "I've been told I'm dense that way."

The cretins' eyes widened with shock, and they took a slow step back.

"I'm not... not going anywhere." Jaune panted out.

Bob shook his head at Jimmy, and the men turn and fled.

Her husband laughed in relief, and turned to her, that stupid grin on his face. "You ok baby?"

She didn't get the chance to respond, as he collapsed to the ground in a heap, the strain finally overtaking him. She was by his side in an instant.

She heard the telltale sound of shattering glass, and looked up to see Neo cleaning her blade off on Bob's corpse, giving Jimmy's a kick for good measure.

Their eyes met. This woman knew her secret, knew what Jaune was, and what he was not. Everything inside her screamed for her to burn this woman to ash, to protect their secret. And yet, she'd saved Jaune, and therefore her. What did that make them?

Neo slowly reached out a hand, flicking her eyes towards Jaune.

She cared about Jaune, and for now, that was all that mattered. The flames in her heart abated, even if for a moment, and she took the girl's hand. They blinked out of existence together.

---

The hospital had been a turbulent affair. Not the least of which because they appeared in the ER waiting room as if by magic. Once there, she'd made it VERY clear that her husband was to be treated immediately, lest she start freeing up rooms for them, one by one.

Neo, surprisingly, or perhaps unsurprisingly, had backed her claim.

And so she sat by his bedside, gently stroking his hair, careful to avoid the gashes in his scalp.

"You're such a fool." She whispered.

Her fool.

She hated herself.

Hated herself for not acting sooner. Hated herself for lying to him.  
Hated herself for having to lie.

But, there were others she hated far more.

The door to the room burst open, and Emerald and Mercury rushed in.

"Is he ok?"

"What can we do?"

She loved them for that, even if she could never speak it.

"Look after Jaune." She said instead.

"Where are you going?" Emerald asked, worry etched on her face.

"I'll be back shortly." Was her only answer. She leaned down and whispered three very important words to him, before moving towards the exit.

"I love you."

Emerald moved to intercept her, but Mercury caught her. They really did understand her, each in their own way.

She pushed through the door and entered into the hallway of the hospital, her eyes falling to her new... something. Neo pushed off

her place on the wall and met her gaze. She reached out to her, and she spoke three more very important words.

"Take me there."

She could feel the vibrations of the music as it boomed out of the warehouse as they approached.

They apparently called themselves 'The Departed.' She supposed that was fitting.

She summoned a pair of black blades to her hands, as she listened to the scrape of Neo drawing her own.

Cinder Fall was a monster.

She knew this. Sometimes, she liked to forget.

But now?

This city was about to remember.

---

## **Rough Seas**

**A boy cries out to me. "Sir, these seas are violent and dark!"**

**" Aye boy, that they be! Did you not know you'd be aboard a ship lad?"**

**" But sir, this is not the ship I first saw!" He protest as the waves splash over the sides of the rails. "It was a ship of gleaming wood and mirth!"**

**I laugh as the rocking of the ship pushes me back onto my heels. "Is that what you thought boy? That we'd see nothing but sunny days? Look again at the hull of the ship."**



**The boy hesitantly peaks his head over the side, and looks down at the tossing seas and the creaking beams.**

**" Sir!"**

**" What do you see boy?"**

**" The beams that make up the bottom of the ship! They are of a different color, they are darker than what sits above the water!"**

**" Yes boy, yes! Do you comprehend?"**

**He shakes his head vigorously. "I do not sir! Why would you build it this way? Why would you steer us into the storm?"**

**I chuckle at the boy. "You still don't understand the nature of ships lad. I've constructed the ship so that she might sail in the shallows of the fluffy coast and the deep waters of the dark ocean alike! It is only now, that the ship is tossed about by the storm of conflict that you see the darker beams, the ones that cut through the water."**

**" I am frightened sir." The boy admits.**

**" Aye lad, so am I, but I have hope too."**

**He stares at me with wide eyes. "What gives you hope sir?"**

**I grin as I slap the mast. "Because I believe son, I believe in this ship, and the mast of emotional connection."**

**" But what if you are wrong sir?"**

**" Then we shall be cast once again into the unforgiving waters of fandom."**

**The boy shivers as he grips onto the rail. "I am not ready to be cast in again sir."**

I tussle the lad's hair. "I don't think we're there yet lad. Crooc has kept the crew well fed and healthy." I hear a shout come from the Crow's Nest. "Hear that, boy? Demy has found a way out of the storm!"

The boy lets out a sigh of relief, before his gaze falls on to the pensive Captain. "Sir, what bedevils the Captain so?"

I hum. "I imagine it's where we've set course for to escape the storm, lad."

"Where is that sir?"

"Siren's cove my boy, siren's cove."

# Momma Always Said

Cr00cy, once more into the breach?

Did you know we're over 1K followers Cr00cy? We're all going to hell.

## Chapter 6

### Momma Always Said

---

Cinder Fall was his wife.

Jaune Arc knew this. He also knew that she was in danger, that he had to save her.

He sat up in his bed with a start, gasping for breath. The young man's gaze traveled around the strange, white room, trying to take in his surroundings.

His breathing slowed and calmed as he found what he was looking for. His wife, asleep in a chair pulled up next to the bed, her head resting on his thigh. He smiled as his hand reached out to brush the hair out of her face.

Thank the Gods, he didn't know what he'd do if something happened to her.

He frowned. Was that... ash on her cheek?

His gaze shifted across the room, finding the others. A smile crossed his lips.

Mercury was laid out in a chair against the wall, mouth wide open as he snored loudly. Em sat beside him, half sprawled across the small night stand next to her own chair.

He shook his head. He hadn't meant to worry them.

Something small and colorful on the table next to him caught his eye. He reached out and grabbed the handmade card, looking over the crude drawing of Cinder, Mercury, Em, and himself next to their house.

He chuckled to himself, briefly wondered who had drawn it, before shifting his attention to the flickering tv.

*" Lisa Lavender coming to you live from the warehouse district, where police are investigating a possible case of arson, after a multi-story storage facility was burned to the ground. Despite being a facility that served as a dog food distribution center, the building was occupied at the time of the fire. Here to describe the event is a local produce merchant who lives in the area, Thomas Generic. Thomas, how would you describe last night?"*

The camera panned over to a wide-eyed, grey-haired man who had his arms wrapped around himself.

*" The screams, oh Gods the screams. They lasted for hours, I don't even think the fire had actually started before-"*

*" Fascinating. Folks, it's always interesting to see how muddled events can become from the perspective of eye-witnesses, especially the elderly."*

*" -The horror... the horror."*

*" Apparently, a local gang had taken up residence there, and was unable to evacuate due to the exits being blocked. The Fire Marshall could not be reached to comment on how this oversight in safety could have occurred."*

Jaune sighed as he flicked off the tv. It was times like these that he was glad they lived out in the suburbs, away from all this craziness, despite the longer drive.

"Jaune?" He heard a groggy voice call, as he felt his wife shift from her place on his leg.

He smiled down at her. "Hey baby."

"Jaune!" She cried as she shot up to the head of bed, wrapping him in a fierce embrace.

"Ow ow ow!" He yelped, as she pressed against his many bruises.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" The dark-haired woman apologized as she pulled back.

"Wazzat?" Mercury mumbled as he stirred, his eyes slowly focusing. "Bro!"

The silver-haired man shook his partner. "Em, wake up!"

"Goddammit Merc, what the fuc-"

"Morning Em, I think you might want to tone down the language while you're on dates." The blond laughed.

"Jaune!" The girl shot up out of her chair, racing Mercury over to his bedside.

"Whoa, whoa!" He said, throwing his hands up. "Still tender."

Mercury nodded. "Sorry bro, we were just-"

"-worried about you." Emerald finished.

He smiled ruefully. "Yeah, not my shining moment."

His wife tsked. "You were very brave Jaune."

"Thanks honey, I-"

"And also incredibly stupid. Those men could have killed you."

He shook his head definitely. "I wasn't going to let them touch you."

Amber eyes narrowed. "I would have been fine my knight, you needn't worry about me."

"You're my wife." He stated simply. "I'll always worry."

"We should have run."

He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "Well, kinda hard for me to argue with that logic from my hospital bed, huh? But you're ok, that's all that matters."

"It is not all that matters. YOU matter." She growled.

"Cindy, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you." He comforted, before sighing. "I'm sorry I wasn't stronger too. I got lucky. I should have-"

She pressed a finger against his lips.

"Not another word Jaune Arc. I don't need you to protect me. I need you. I've always needed you, just that."

The blond opened his mouth to protest, before a hand found his shoulder, and he turned to see Mercury nodding along.

"She's right man. Besides, I think this is the part where you stay quiet and agree with her."

Emerald slipped her hand into his.

"Don't scare us like that."

"Guys-" He choked on the words, taking a moment to collect himself. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I'll be better... I'll be stronger. I promise."

Cinder Fall was his wife. This was his family.

Jaune Arc knew this, and he'd do what he had to protect them. And he knew just where to start too.

---

Cinder Fall was a monster.

She knew this, and now the city did too. Unfortunately, that came with consequences. She'd received the message that she'd been expecting about an hour after Jaune awoke.

*' We need to talk.' - R.T.*

*' I'm busy, will be with you shortly.'* She'd sent back.

She knew that the questions would come. Such an overt action against an element of the city's underworld raised questions. Questions that she'd have to answer sooner rather than later, or risk upsetting the delicate balance of the city.

She wasn't sorry about it. She'd never be sorry about it, just like she'd never be sorry about making Roman wait the remaining hours until Jaune fell asleep again. She instructed Emerald and Mercury to watch after him, to make sure he wasn't foolish, as was his nature, till she returned.

Sure, the doctors had told them that he'd be cleared for release soon, but he was her husband. She had a right to worry.

That was not the only thing that worried her at the moment however. No, a certain murderous imp occupied that space as well now.

She couldn't comprehend the woman, but she did know this...

She knew the truth about Jaune, and that made her dangerous. She also knew that she'd acted in his defense, and in retaliation against those that dared to touch him.

She didn't know what that made her, but as walked toward the meeting location, she was determined to find out.

---

Neo was a Monster.

She knew this. Several people had tried to remind her of the fact last night.

She appreciated their concern and enthusiasm in the matter.

Currently, she was a very bored Monster. She could only watch Roman pace back and forth, muttering about his plans and distribution networks that had been broken up, for so long before it ceased to be entertaining.

She wasn't particularly surprised by him being upset. He got that way sometimes when people disappeared. She'd never let it stop her in the past, and she wouldn't let it stop her in the future. He'd get over it... eventually. He was good about things like that. It was one of the reasons she'd adopted him.

It was really for his benefit anyway. She knew her attention could be... a bit much to handle, so she'd gone out in search of something else entertaining, and what had she found? Blondie.

Unfortunately, Blondie had been accompanied by Fire Bitch at the time, which had prevented her from approaching directly. But stalking? That wasn't a crime! Not one anyone had ever effectively enforced on her anyway.

And Blondie, as always, was entertaining. He positively showered the Fire Bitch with attention, while at the same time, managing to engage just about everyone he met, making them feel like they were special.

She wanted to feel special.



So, she did what any reasonable person would do. She dragged Hoppy into a supply closet and helped her get some much needed rest. That girl was far too spun up for her own good. Weren't rabbits supposed to like sex? Was that racist? She'd always strove to be an equal opportunity Monster.

She'd shown up at his table, and he'd been excited to see her, which she thought was the appropriate reaction. That or terror. It really varied from person to person.

Fire Bitch had been neither. Fire Bitch had been pissed. She probably would have been too, but if you weren't strong enough to hold onto the things that you owned, then they weren't really yours, now were they?

Unfortunately, Fire Bitch had made her retreat to voyeur distance again, watching the rest of the meal while borrowing other people's alcohol. She'd followed them outside, and listened into what was next for their three person date. They were all going to the movies apparently. She'd never been a huge fan, but the dark of the theater was full of so many... opportunities.

They'd taken a turn down a dark alley, because apparently Blondie wanted a tragic backstory, and sure enough, they'd run into trouble. She'd been excited. She'd get to see what Blondie was made of!

It turned out it was blood. A good deal of blood, that the two men in the alley were more than happy to help him get out of his system. The man kept standing up though, time and again. He had a lot of 'fuck you' in his system as well apparently. She liked that. It's what made her make her decision.

She was going to adopt him.

She'd watched in confusion, waiting for Fire Bitch to react. To defend what was hers, but she'd held back, until Neo had to step in and defend what was newly *hers*.

Why?

As the door to Roman's office opened, revealing the woman in red, she supposed she'd find out.

---

Cinder took a deep breath as she stepped through the portal of Roman's office. She hated explaining herself, especially those beneath her. But, she cast a glance over to the his desk, where the imp sat, legs dangling off the edge as she kicked them, she knew she had no choice.

And she HATED that.

She'd sold her soul for power. The power to decide. The power to not be afraid.

She'd paid her price, paid in blood.

And yet, there she had been, standing in an alley powerless last night, and here she stood in this small-time gangster's office, under the thumb of this imp.

Life, much like herself, was a bitch.

"You asked to meet Roman? I hope it's worth my time."

The man tsked at her. At HER.

What an asshole.

"You know what this is about, let's just skip to the good part."

"And you wonder why you're not more popular with the ladies." She drawled.

The imp had a good little silent chuckle at that. Good, she could use what good will she could get from the mysterious woman.

"Hilarious." He deadpanned. "What went down at the docks? Why are the 'Departed' recently departed?"

She supposed she'd set herself up for that pun. Time to see how far the imp would let her stretch.

"Who says I had anything to do with it? More importantly, what concern is it of yours?"

"It's MY city, and Neo told me." He said, jerking a thumb back towards the petite woman. "Also told me that you dragged her into it."

Ok, apparently not that far.

She hummed. "It WAS your city. What else did the little darling say?"

The heinously dressed man turned back to imp, watching as she went through a series of pantomimes that she would have bet anything weren't actually sign language, before turning back to her.

"She says you offered to pay her."

The imp shot a thumb skyward.

"A lot." Roman clarified.

This bitch.

"Yes, that is true."

The imp continued to make motions, causing the ginger to scowl.

"That can't be right."

She sighed. "What else did she say?"

"Said you'd owe her a favor."

What was she-

More hand motions.

He raised an eyebrow. "A very personal favor."

She was going to strangle this bitch.

His eyes shot back over to her. "Why? Them being gone slows us down. I relied on them for muscle and transport."

"I don't answer to you Roman." She growled.

The imp slowly shook her head behind the man, wagging a finger back and forth.

Would let it go at that, eh? Time to try the lie again.

"If it bothers you so much, know that they were talking to the police. They had to be dealt with, so I dealt with them." She stated.

The midget shot her a confused look, before Roman rounded on her, and she shrugged and nodded.

The man sighed. "Yeah, ok, but did you have to take out the whole gang? Why not just the rats?"

Wasn't that a good question? She mentally shrugged. He thought she was a bitch? She'd play the bitch.

"Oh Roman, it's about sending a message. People think they can cross us? Now they know what happens. I'm not a woman of half measures... neither is your partner."

The little monstrosity beamed at that.

The thug rolled his eyes. "Don't I know it." His gaze narrowed. "But why so public? Why so loud? Why not come to me?"

Clockwork Orange was smarter than he looked. Her amber eyes met pink and brown as she searched for an explanation.

---

Today was fun.

She was getting to make the Fire Bitch squirm, which is something she'd been hoping for for a while now. Turnabout is fair play and all that.

She'd had to fight from falling off the desk when the woman had tried to suggest that she didn't have anything to do with the attack.

This bitch was crazy.

Roman shot that down pretty quickly. Then she'd throw to ball back to her, asking what else she'd said. Neo raised an eyebrow. She wanted to let her decide? Ok, time to see how far she could push it.

She asked for money first. Not like she really needed it.

Fire Bitch brushed it off.

Oh?

She asked for a LOT of money.

Fucking nothing. Ok, time to raise the steaks.

She asked for her favorite thing, the thing that made people the most uncomfortable, and therefore was the most entertaining.

A favor.

Ooh! Scratch that! A favor involving Blondie!

Unsurprisingly, Roman didn't have the balls to fully translate that one.

Fire Bitch was not a fan of that at ALL.

But why wasn't she doing anything? Why not call her bluff? Why not threaten to burn them both to ash? She had the power, it was what made her a Monster, so why not use it?

She OWNED Blondie, so why wasn't she fighting for him?

She made up some nonsense about messages and power, but Neo doubted anyone had ever really been confused about what crossing them meant. And then Roman asked the good shit.

Why?

She leaned in for that one.

---

Her mouth felt dry, her hands sweaty. She hadn't felt this way since she was a little girl.

She had nothing.

There was no logical explanation. No witty remark to save her. She was stuck with an impossible question and a living lie detector in the back of the room.

Why had SHE chosen to go burn down the hideout of a group of the city's worst with a very recognizable Neo in tow?

For love.

Wasn't that ironic?

But she couldn't answer that way, and she couldn't tell him that she'd chosen to do so to advance their agenda, not without the imp calling her on it.

So she chose a half-truth, something that had served her well over the past few years, and hoped. Gods but she hated relying on hope.

It was so... weak.

"I was angry." Gods but it rankled her to have to admit such to the man. "I decided they disrespected us, disrespected ME, and I decided to deal with it. Nothing more, nothing less. I wouldn't take it back if I could."

They sat in silence for a moment, before the man started in on a low chuckle.

"Always knew you had a temper, but didn't take you as one to act on it."

Good, he was buying it. She looked to the imp, who was tilting her head and staring at her.

Roman's grin grew. "How does the man of the house feel about it?"

Not disemboweling his smug ass was going to be feat of will power.

"Do not try to bring yourself into my personal life, unless you want me to come into yours Roman." She warned, earning a flinch from the man. "How much of a slowdown in operations are we talking?"

He huffed and shrugged. "I dunno, I'll have to see who I can scrounge together. I'm betting on a few weeks though."

Shit. That would be hard to explain to the council. More importantly though...

"You'll make do. You always do. I'm confident in your continued support."

Amber eyes met pink and brown. The smaller woman nodded cheerily... a little TOO cheerily for her taste.

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks for the pep talk boss." Roman grumbled.

She was barely listening anymore. She had what she came for.

---

Neo watched the woman with rapt fascination.

She'd lied, but she hadn't lied.

There was an art to that she supposed. She'd never had to master it of course. Killing people that didn't like her answers was considerably simpler.

But that wasn't what was so interesting. What was interesting was that Fire Bitch was *apologizing*.

Oh, she'd never actually use the words. Neo doubted 'I'm sorry' had crossed those lips to anyone outside of Blondie in a long, long time.

But there it was, wasn't it? Blondie.

She was willing to debase herself for him. To make herself weak for him. Monsters didn't do that, especially towards things that they owned.

The problem raced around her mind like a soon-to-be victim, till it came to its only reasonable solution.

She didn't own Blondie, she allowed Blondie to own her.

Neo shook her head. People were weird, and complicated. But still...

It was interesting. Entertaining even.

She sighed. There was only one reasonable choice left to be made.

She'd have to adopt them both.

---

Emerald closed her eyes and slowly sipped her coffee in the cafe of the hospital, which meant that it was shitty coffee, but she needed the caffeine.



It had been a long twelve hours.

But now it was over. Jaune was ok, Cinder had satiated her bloodlust, all was right with the-

"Em, we got problems!" Mercury shouted as he burst into the room.

She was always curious which God in particular hated her so.

She sighed. "Merc, calm down. What's the-"

"I lost Jaune!"

Holy shit.

"YOU FUCKING WHAT?!" She roared.

"It's not like I meant to!" He defended.

"How Merc? How did you LOSE Jaune!?"

"It's a funny story actually."

It wasn't.

"See, he said he wanted to play hide-and-seek, which I thought was weird, right? But I could tell that he was tired of being nannied, so I was like, 'what the hell?'" The silver-haired man spread his arms wide. "And now he's gone! No one could have predicted this!"

"Anyone could have predicted it Merc! Anyone!"

"Geez Em, I know you got a thing for the guy, but-"

She placed a finger on his lips. "Shhhhh. You hear that? It's the promise of me making your life a living horror film if you so much as say another word. One starring your dad. Do we understand each other?"

He nodded slowly.

"Good, now let's go find Jaune before we're playing hide-and-seek with Cinder." She grimaced. "And she plays for keeps."

---

Cinder Fall was a monster.

Adam Taurus knew his. He also knew that she was a necessary evil, one with the power and connections to help him finally free his people from their second class status.

Adam snorted, blowing the stench of the city out of his nose. It smelled like Atlas.

He hated Atlas.

He hated asking for help too, especially from a human, and yet here he was, waiting meet with this woman, this monster, to make his deal with the devil.

And she had the audacity to be late.

Oh, her peons had tried to explain it away, to say that she was meeting with another partner, one that be crucial to their plans, but he recognized a power play when he saw one.

He was about to turn and leave, to go back to Fang, where he belonged, when something peculiar happened. Someone recognized him. That was almost never a good thing in his line of work, but what was so strange about this occurrence was how excited they seemed about it. He'd seen terrified before, but excited? That was new.

The man approached him without hesitation, with a confidence that made him unconsciously reach for the hilt of his blade. He wore a crop of messy blond hair, looked to be young, and had piercing, knowing blue eyes.

"Sadam?" The blond asked.

Just like a human to play mind games.

"It's Adam."

The blond tsked. "Damn, was sure I remembered it right."

Remembered it from where? Who was this man? Atlas Specialist? Vale security? A shadow faction?

"And you are?"

The blond slapped a hand against his head, still content to play the aloof fool.

"Sorry about that. I'm Jaune Arc." The man said as he held out a hand.

Adam stared at it.

"And you know me how?"

The man chuckled. "Honestly? I guessed. My wife gave a pretty accurate description though."

His wife? He couldn't possibly mean...

"Cinder?" He guessed.

The man made finger guns at him. Today was a strange day already.

"Got it in one!"

"And what did she say?"

Jaune coughed. "Uh... that you were tall, dark, and broody. Kind of dressed like a vampire. You pull it off though!" He quickly amended.

He grunted. The man was choosing to tell him the truth. A new tactic for a human.

"I suppose it's good to know how others see you."

The blond laughed. "Ain't that the truth?"

He hummed. "And you are here because..."

The man shrugged. "Any friend of Cinder is a friend of mine."

"I wasn't aware that we were friends."

Jaune wore an easy smile.

"You know what my mom always said? Strangers are just friends that you haven't met yet."

His eyes scanned over the man's various bandages and bruises.

"And did your 'friends' give you those?"

To his surprise, the blond laughed.

"Ok, fair point. She's accurate most of the time though."

"Somehow I doubt it."

The man shook his head. "Damn, you are angsty."

His hand brushed against Blush.

"What did you say?"

The blond blushed. "Sometimes I don't have a great filter. She said that you were pretty sore over some breakup, and..." He paled.

"Shit, I did it again, didn't I?"

He could feel his rage bubbling up, his fury about to overtake him. How dare this human?

"First of all, my justifiable rage comes from the lot of the faunus in Remnant. The lot assigned to them by your kind." He growled.

The man nodded. "Yeah, you guys have gotten a pretty bad break. So, there's no girl then?"

"She is immaterial."

The blond's eyes widened.

"So there IS a girl. What's she like? Must be pretty special."

She was beautiful, strong, cunning, pure...

"That's hardly what matters. What matters is the fight for the oppressed. The fight for the cause." He argued.

Jaune cocked his head. "How are you going to fix that?"

How dare this human taunt him?

"By being strong. Strength is the only thing that humans understand. We will make them feel the fear that they've instilled in us for so long." He spat. "Perhaps if you'd been stronger, you wouldn't be in the state you are in now."

Then the man did something he didn't expect again. He shrugged.

"Hey, when you're right, you're right. I'd love to have been stronger, I probably need to be. But you're not exactly weak, are you? I mean, you won the faunus war, right?"

He'd never, ever heard a human bring up their species loss before.

"What of it?"

Jaune shrugged. "So, what did you gain?"

"The ability to be discriminated against in the location of our choosing."

The blond nodded. "So what's the plan now?"

Where was he going with this?

"Strike until our equality is undeniable."

"Even though it didn't work out the first time?"

Ah, now he understood. The man liked to talk in circles, to confuse you until you let your guard down. His swordmaster, Martin, had taught him such techniques during their time together as he instructed him in counter-fighter. The best option was to cut straight to the source.

"And what would you have us do human? Nothing?"

Jaune shook his head sadly. "Of course not. I'd be crazy to ask that."

Accurate.

"Then what are you saying?"

The blond hummed. "I mean, if it was me? I'd try to legitimize. The White Fang, those guys are powerful-"

He was surprised both by the human's admission of their power, and the fact that he didn't directly associate him with the group. He was allowing him deniability within the city, within this meeting. It was subtle, but clever.

"-But right now they're considered terrorists. People can always hate a terrorist. But, if they changed, if they became a union, one that enforced the laws that are already supposed to be in place? How do you argue with that?"

Another logic trap... albeit a clever one.

"And if the humans don't agree to comply? What then?"

The man chuckled. "Then I'd go on strike I guess. I mean, the faunus are what? Half the population of Remnant? Not quite? They certainly make up over half the workers for the SDC. I think you could bring most companies to their knees without firing a shot."

That wasn't wrong, but...

"And I suppose that makes up for years of abuse and mistreatment? Of discrimination and hatred?"

"Of course not."

He had the human!

"So you admit the need for the cause!" He half-shouted.

"I guess that depends..."

"Depends on what?"

"Depends on what's really important to you. Is it equality or revenge?"

"What do you know of it? When have you ever wondered where to next boot from your 'betters' would come from?"

"Whoa, whoa!" The human pleaded, hands raised in surrender.  
"Calm down Saddam, I mean Adam! Look, I don't know anything about it, ok?"

Of course he didn't. No human did.

"But, my dad used to always say something about being in a relationship. You can be right, or you can be happy, but you can rarely be both."

He was going to stab this human.

"Are you saying that faunus and humans are... in a relationship?" He asked, unbelieving.

The blond shrugged. "I mean, aren't we? We share a home, we depend on each other, we're both united against the Grimm."

He snorted. He couldn't believe how simple the human thought it all was.

"Also, it's not just the cause your upset about, it's the girl."

His hand was halfway to Blush before he stopped himself.

"That bad, huh?" The human said sympathetically. "She doesn't agree on the cause thing I take it?"

"She doesn't understand the important of the cause!" He snapped.

"Does the cause keep you warm at night? Does it ask how your day was? Does it laugh at your shitty jokes?"

The cause certainly did not.

"So, I should abandon it all for a woman?"

The man, infuriatingly, shrugged again. "I won't tell you what to do, not my place, but you've got the strength to protect your family... so why fight further? Fighting for fighting's sake just seems like continuing the cycle, doesn't it?"

Martin would have liked this one indeed, he struck for the heart. His words weren't without a odd wisdom though...

"You're a strange man."

The blond laughed. "So everyone tells me." He grinned. "I'm not wearing a mask though. What are you hiding under there? A cool



scar or something?"

No one asked about the man under the mask. He mentally shrugged. What could it hurt?

His slowly removed the mask, brown eyes meeting blue.

"... Goddammit, you're handsome too?" The blond sighed. "Why can't I pull off broody? That girl doesn't stand a chance if you just go apologize."

He tsked. "I don't think it's that easy."

Jaune hummed. "I guess you won't know until you try. You gonna tell me about her or what?"

And to Adam's surprise, he began to.

---

Mercury let his arms fall to his sides in defeat.

"He's gone. He's in the wind. He's a ghost."

Emerald slowly rubbed her temples.

"Merc, shut up and keep looking." She growled.

"What's the point? We've been everywhere! The guy's too fucking good."

"Merc! The is Jaune, *Jaune Arc*, that we're talking about! Sound familiar? The husband of the scariest woman we've ever met, your dad complex, and apparently - cause I've been told it enough times, the fucking love of my life. That Jaune Arc. That's the one that you're submitting to me is a mastermind that can't be found?"

The man stared at his feet as they shuffled around nervously.

"Well, when you put it that way..."

She groaned. "Look, the good news is that it's Jaune. How much trouble can he..." She trailed off as watched Mercury start to play with his Scroll. "What the fuck are you doing?"

He hummed. "I got an InstaScroll notification."

"I'm going to kill you. Then Cinder will kill me. Then she'll find a way to resurrect us both, and kill us again."

"Um... you might want to hold off on that. I think I found Jaune." He said, turning around the Scroll for her to see.

Sure enough, there was Jaune Arc, his arm wrapped around a what looked to be a VERY unwilling red-headed man with a grin on his face. The caption read:

*' Getting my boi some non-black threads!'*

"We're boys." She vaguely heard Mercury grumble as she focused in on the other man, before the light bulb went off in her head.

"Is that Adam Goddamn Taurus!?"

There were so many questions. How? Why? Why again. Probably why a third time.

Unfortunately, they'd have to wait, as her own Scroll chose that moment to start ringing. She winced as she saw who it was before answering.

"H-hey Cinder. What's good in the hood?"

"... Emerald."

"Yes ma'am?"

"That's better. That animal Adam stood me up. Can you believe the audacity? What else could he possibly have to do?"

Mercury held up another post, this one with Adam in an all white suit, and a caption:

*' Don't know how Big Daddy and Broman pull it off. Gotta try something different'*

"T-that's crazy."

"Insane, I agree. He will know my displeasure." Her voice softened.  
"How's Jaune? Did you check out of the hospital yet?"

Another post. This one a blurry picture of Adam choking a sales clerk, reading:

*' Ok, I probably should've figured red was a poor choice.'*

"He's great! Never better! Excited to see you!"

"Excellent, I'll head straight home."

Oh Gods.

"H-hey, take your time. See the city!"

"... I live here Emerald."

A picture of Jaune and Adam looking at jewelry was held before her.

*' Gotta say sorry the right way!'*

"Tell you what. You'll probably beat us home. We're going to pick up food. Mistralian. You like Mistralian right? Great!"

"Emerald-"

"Love you too! Bye!"

She clicked the Scroll off and looked at Mercury with eyes wide with terror.

"What are you staring at!? Go! Go! Go!"

---

## **Siren's Call**

**A boy looks up to me, confusion in his eyes, and a question on his tongue.**

**" Sir?"**

**" Yes, boy?"**

**He nods to the men standing on either side of me, lashing me to the mast.**

**" Why do Sir Crooc and Demy tie you to the ship?"**

**" Because they're kinky like that." I laugh, before letting out a yelp as the men tighten the bonds more than strictly necessary, shooting me annoyed glares.**

**" But sir... why?" The boy questions.**

**" Ah lad, it's because of our destination!" I gesture with my nose. "Do you see that island there in front of us? The one that Burk steers us toward."**

**" Aye, sir."**

**" That be Sirens' Cove boy. A place all ships must pass through if they wish to continue on."**

**" What is there, sir?"**

**I chuckle. "Why the Sirens of course. They will sing their song and temp us to leap from the ship onto the jagged rocks below. Many an unfinished ship resides there."**

The boy nods. "And so they tie you to the mast to prevent this?"

" There's a smart lad. These two won't let the tale go unfinished, for better or worse."

The boy's eyes sweep over the deck. "But sir, what of the rest of the crew?"

" See there, the bear of black and white and the amorous father? They hand out rope to tie yourself to the rail and wax to plug your ears for those that wish it. But no man must stay, not even the Captain. It's about choice lad, it always is with ships."

" Will you take the wax?"

I shake my head. "No, I must listen to the Sirens, lest the trial remain incomplete." The grave master of arms blows his horn. "Now, we approach! Make your choice boy!"

He considers it for a moment, before taking a length of rope and ball of wax from the bear. He doesn't hear my sigh of relief, or my muttering.

" Good, it would have been awkward if my narrative device jumped ship."

" WHAT?"

" NOTHING BOY! HERE WE GO!"

We cross into the high walls of the channel, and they begin to appear, propping themselves up on the rocks and taking deep breaths before starting their terrible song.

*" You fucking suck bro! You're a bargain bin comedy writer at best!"*

***" You're not going to be able to pull off the drama, might as well give up now!"***

**I squirm against the restraints, grinding my teeth as their song rages in my ears.**

***" Why not just let a better author do it? I wonder if Coeur is free. Oh wait-"***

**" Fuck you!" I shout back at them.**

**The boy looks at me with panic. "ARE YOU OK, SIR!?"**

***" You know what we could be doing? Watching YouTube for hours."*** One sings.

**" BOY! THE THINGS THEY SING! THEY BURN!"**

**" WE'RE ALMOST THERE SIR! I CAN SEE THE END!"**

***" Hey Carl? You ever see a good KnightFall story before?"***

***" Nope."***

***" Well guess what? Now you still haven't."***

**I howl as I rage against the ropes, foaming at the mouth like a madman, almost blacking out in my fury.**

**" WE'RE THERE SIR! WE MADE IT!"** The boy cries as he pulls the wax from his ears.

**I slump against the ropes, exhausted.**

**" Sir! Are you alright?!"**

**I give him a weak smile. "I will be lad, I will be. Help me down, will you?"**

The boy nods and begins to work on my restraints. "What now sir?"

I hum as I rub my wrist. "We see if there's anyone left on the ship, lad."

" Then what sir?"

" Why, then we chase the fleet."

He tilts his head to the side.

" Which fleet is that sir?"

I grin. "The fleet of better authors."

---

## Feeding the Crew

Cr00cy keeping us in line

Crooc hummed, lost in thought. It was time to give the crew another meal. The main dish was ready, but what seasoning should he use?

He picked up a black bottle, and considered it for a moment, before adding a few drops to the stew. Yes, a bit of sour drama would make the sweetness of comedy stand out more. Afterall, it wouldn't do to go overboard with either.

Make it too sweet, and dish would become bland. Make it too sour, and... Well, he would prefer to not walk the plank, thank you very much.

He took a sip of the stew, and nodded. Yes, it was good. Now just to spice it up a bit... would foreshadowing be better? Or maybe action?

No, action wouldn't fit for this one. Foreshadowing it is then.

**One last sampling, and... yes, this was good. All the seasonings blended nicely together, no single one overpowering the others, but working together to bring out dish's taste. This would do, for now.**

**A few minutes later the dish was ready. Now, how would crew like this one? Only one way to find out.**



# Hunters and Househusbands

Cr00cy they're still here, aren't they? \*Sigh\* Poor life choices all around

## Chapter 7

### Hunters and Househusbands

---

Jaune Arc was a weak man.

He knew this. But he also knew that his wife, his family, needed him to be something different. Something more.

It's why he was sitting in front of his favorite coffee shop, sipping on his latte, waiting for an old friend, one that could help him achieve his old dream, albeit for different reasons than he originally set out for. He spotted her tight blonde bun sitting atop her stern face in the crowd, and waived her over, a warm smile overtaking her face as she saw him. He stood as she approached. Papa Arc had raised a gentleman after all.

A grin split his face. "Glynda! It's been too long!"

"It has, I hope you've been well." She said, extending a hand out to him, that he stared at, before pulling the older woman into a tight hug, earning a yelp from her.

Mama Arc had raised a hugger.

She laughed. "Ok, ok! I know how you feel about handshakes, now let me go!"

He shook his head as he pulled her seat out for her.

"Can't believe you thought you were getting away without one."

She snorted as she waved over a waiter. "You're right, whatever was I thinking, expecting not to get assaulted in public?"

He laughed as he sat down across from her. "You love the hugs! Also, I don't think anyone is assaulting Glynda Goodwitch. I hear she can take care of herself."

"When I have to." She acknowledged. "One coffee please, two sugars." She said to the waiter, before turning back to Jaune. "But really Jaune, it's been far too long. I miss this."

"Me too. We see a lot less of each other since you stopped pretending to need my help after I got turned away from Beacon."

"Well, that'll happen when you submit fake transcripts. Really Jaune, I still can't believe you tried that." She admonished, before sighing. "You were so heartbroken, and it wasn't any big thing for me to offer you work when I needed help."

He gave her a look. "Glynda."

"I'm a busy woman, I can't handle everything!" She defended.

"You hired me to walk your cat. Your cat, Glynda."

"Mr. Pounce was in need of exercise! I'll have you know that he's grown quite chubby in your absence." She informed him.

He grinned and shook his head. "Good to know the old furball is still kicking around." He sighed. "You know, I don't think I ever thanked you properly. You... you caught me in a bad place, and you helped when you didn't have to."

She tsked. "I simply found a young man in need of work and provided what I could. There's no need for thanks." She thanked the waiter as he brought over her coffee.

"Besides, you were always going to be ok, you're too stubborn not to be." She gestured towards the front of the coffee shop. "Didn't you

think about buying this store front once?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I thought about it, but you know, kinda got sidetracked." He said, as he held up his left hand and showed off his wedding band.

Glynda gave him a warm smile. "I still can't believe you didn't invite me to the wedding."

"It was in a courthouse." He defended.

"I would have still come." She admonished.

He laughed. "I know you would've. Cindy's just... shy I guess. She doesn't like big to-dos. You wouldn't believe how long it took my to get her to come home with me."

"How is she Jaune? When do I get to meet her?"

"She's doing good, real good. She's just always busy with work, you know?"

The woman rolled her eyes. "I'm familiar with the idea."

"Oz is still being Oz, huh?"

She sighed. "Jaune, he's killing me. He's got this idea in his head about catapulting students into the Emerald forest to find chess pieces. I feel less intelligent for having said that sentence out loud."

He chuckled. "You're a saint Glynda."

"Yes, the saint of worn patience, what prestige." She drawled, earning another laugh from the boy. She took another sip of her coffee, and gave him a serious look. "But how are you? Really?"

He sighed. "I can't hide anything from you, can I?"

She hummed. "The cuts and bruises don't help."

He nodded. "Yeah. We... we had a scare recently. Got mugged a few days ago."

She gasped. "Gods, Jaune, is everyone ok? Have you talked to the police?"

He held up a hand. "We're fine Glynda, I just got knocked around a bit." He gave her a small smile as he rapped his knuckles on his head. "I'm hard headed though."

"You're not that hard headed Jaune." She warned, before nodding to herself. "That's why you called me isn't it? And here I thought you just wanted to catch up." She pouted.

He smiled. "Can't it be both? But yeah, I want to try again. I NEED to try again."

She sighed. "Jaune, you really don't. You don't need to be a Huntsman to protect your family. That's what we have police and Huntsmen FOR. You understand that you're going to be older than most of the other students anyway, right? That's if you get in."

He shook his head. "I need to do it Glynda. It's important to ME. Even if I'm going to be working uphill. Besides, I'm a househusband now, what else do I have going on?" He joked.

She eyed him carefully. "You know I can't give you special treatment, right? You're just another applicant in the system."

He nodded. "Yeah, I know. All I'm asking for is the chance."

"Do you even have your Aura unlocked? I'm guessing no."

He smiled brightly. "Not even a little."

"Jaune Arc, you will be the death of me." She grumbled. "I'll make you deal. You come to me before school starts with *something* approaching skill this time, and I'LL unlock your Aura for you."

"You wound me. It sounds like you don't believe in me." He said with mock hurt.

She snorted. "You only have a couple of months Jaune."

"I'm feeling real motivated."

She looked at him over her glasses. "I can see that. Very well, take this." She sighed, as she fished out a business card and handed it over. "All the information on how and where to apply is on there. Just go to that website."

"Glynda... thank you."

She tsked. "You won't be so grateful when I'm your professor. I'm notorious."

He laughed. "The Notorious G, huh?"

She gave him a playful glare. "It's not too late for me to take that card back."

He shook his head sadly. "Someone's having a hard day. You know what I think someone needs?" He asked, slowly slipping out of his chair.

She held up a finger in warning. "Jaune Arc, don't you dare. No additional hugs are needed! Jaune!"

He just grinned as he closed the distance. "Bring it in G."

---

Cinder Fall was a monster.

She knew this. She also knew that if Watts didn't stop babbling on about whatever doomed for failure science experiment he was working on, she was likely to try to incinerate the projection of him the strange floating Grimm displayed along with the rest of their 'conference.'

Gods but she felt terrible. Had she eaten something? She'd never gotten sick off Jaune's cooking before.

"-And so, where Merlot failed, I shall succeed." Watts finished, beaming at his own brilliance. His brand of insufferable was truly a talent.

"Yes, I'm sure playing with a technology that you don't fully understand stands no chance of backfiring Watts. Do tell us when you start your experiments. I'd like to be as far away as possible." She drawled.

"You have no understanding of the science!" He growled.

"I *understand* that it led to a lot of people dying last time. So again, let me know when you're about to start. I have a bottle of wine I've been saving for when your arrogance finally catches up to you."

"Arrogance! You want to talk about-"

"Arthur, be calm." Salem warned, silencing the man immediately. Cinder tried not to shiver as her gaze shifted over to her. "Cinder, there is no need to bait our friends so."

She almost gagged at the word 'friend,' but nodded.

"Yes ma'am."

"Good, I'm glad we understand each other." The woman said softly. "Now, why don't you share *your* report with the group?"

Her breath caught in her chest. This was it.

"There have been... complications with the plan." She tried.

Watts barked a laugh. "Complications?"

"Arthur, did we not say that it is rude to interrupt?" Salem asked coldly.

The man stilled like an adder had wrapped around him.

"Of course my Queen. I apologize!" He rushed out.

She nodded once. "See that it doesn't happen again. Cinder, you were saying?"

She could feel the cold sweat trickling down her back as the monstrous eyes locked in on her again.

"Yes ma'am. The faunus revolutionaries that we were planning on bringing into the fold have been getting cold feet. They're fighting the negotiations more than we expected."

Salem hummed. "I thought this Adam was ideal for our needs?"

"He is! He will be." She promised. "I just need a bit more time."

"Time is not something I like to spend frivolously, my dear. Tell me, what of the Dust gathering operations?"

Cinder swallowed, a lump catching in her throat.

"There was a fire... we lost a significant portion of our workforce."

"Oh dear." The demon said.

Hazel, mercifully, attempted to come to her aid.

"Do you need muscle? I can only offer myself, but I might be able to help in the interim." The giant offered.

Cinder opened her mouth to accept, but Salem cut her off.

"No my gentle giant, you will stay out of Vale for the time being. You are still too recognizable to our target. This is Cinder's issue, and hers alone." She cocked her head to the side. "How much time dear?"

"Two weeks." She half-whispered.

"My, that is disappointing." She said softly, causing her skin to crawl. "But, perhaps there is another task you can assist me with." She turned back to Watts, who was carefully studying the table in silence. "Arthur, tell the group about your new... what did you call it? A virus?"

The man straightened, obviously pleased to be the center of attention again.

"Exactly so, my Queen. It allows the user to infest a computer system and take control of it. If I can get into the CCT tower, we can bring the whole system down."

Salem hummed, her blank eyes finding her own.

"And could you make this happen Cinder? We already have plans for you to infiltrate the school."

She leapt at the chance for redemption.

"Yes! I mean, yes ma'am."

The pale face studied her for a moment before nodding.

"Very well. I hope that you're right. I do so hate being disappointed."

She bowed her head, trying not to scowl at Watt's sneering face. "Of course, ma'am."

"Get to it then, my dear. I'm not a patient woman." Were the last words spoken before the feed was cut. She let out a slow breath, and fell back in her chair.

This was bad. She needed results, and she needed them soon. She-

Two knocks on the door announced Emerald.

"Enter." She called.



The tanned girl poked her head in the room nervously.

"How'd it go?"

"Not particularly well."

Emerald winced as she walked into the room. "That bad, huh?"

She sighed. "We're behind schedule on the Dust, we don't have the Fang, and now we have an additional objective at Beacon. No Emerald, I'm not feeling very triumphant at the moment."

"What's the plan?" She asked.

Wasn't that a good question? Honestly, she didn't have much of one, but she couldn't afford to show weakness in front of her subordinates.

"You've seen to our admission to Beacon?"

The girl nodded. "I've been working with Leo. We should check out. To the rest of the world, we're students of Haven."

She hummed. "Good. I'll need a meeting with Adam, and we can see if we can't use some of his manpower to bolster Roman's."

"Got it. I'll set it up."

"No. I have a feeling that that's a conversation I'm going to have to have personally. Something seems to have made our dear revolutionary believe he has options. I need to dissuade him of that illusion."

"Yes ma'am." Emerald said, as she started to fidget nervously in place.

She raised an eyebrow. "Yes, Emerald?"

The girl's eye found other places to be. "It's just... what are we going to do with Jaune when it happens? You know, if we pull it off."

"WHEN we achieve our goal, Jaune will be at home with his family. A fortunately timed visit. He will see the tragedy unfold I'm sure, but he will be safe."

Emerald let out a sigh of relief, and she felt a wave of both affection and annoyance at the girl.

"And we shall be refugees, miraculously having safely escaped the city. We will contact him as soon as is realistic given the situation. I don't intend to have my husband worry for a moment longer than necessary."

Emerald nodded. "Ok, sounds good. What next?"

She sighed and picked up her Scroll. "We figure out what groceries Jaune wants us to pick up on the way home."

Just not whatever they'd had last night. She still felt terrible.

---

*~ Pretty woman, walkin' down the street, Pretty woman the kind I like to meet, Pretty woman I don't believe you, you're not the truth ~*

Jaune's Scroll sang with his wife's familiar ringtone. He smiled as he opened it up.

"Hey, pretty lady."

She smiled back. "Hello, my knight."

"How's your day going?"

She groaned. "Meetings all morning."

He laughed. "It's hard to be the boss lady."

She hummed. "The boss lady needs to know what we're having for dinner."

"How does pork chops grab you?"

"Can we do spicy? I'm feeling spicy."

"Sure thing baby. You know what you need to pick up for curry?"

She rolled her eyes. "Honestly Jaune, I'm not that-"

"Em!" He said loudly into the scroll, smiling as the green haired girl's face appeared in the background.

"I know what to grab."

"Thanks Em."

His wife scowled, and he laughed.

"I ever tell you you're pretty when you pout?"

She tsked. "Flattery will not solve this issue for you Jaune Arc."

"You sure? It's got a good track record."

"You're impossible." She sighed.

"You chose me."

"So I did." She sighed. "Jaune do we have something for an upset stomach at the house, or do I need to pick something up?"

His face scrunched in concern. "Yeah, we've got some stuff. You not feeling ok?"

"Just feeling a little natuous. Probably a stomach bug."

He watched Emerald scowl in the background. Good, she'd watch after her.

"Feel better baby. Come on home as soon as you can and I'll take care of you."

"Thank you my knight. Where are you by the way?"

"Oh." He spun the camera around to show the back of Big Daddy Bane's club. "Bane has like a 'lost and found' type deal at the club. Said he'd let me pick through it. Said you'd be shocked at what people are willing to part with."

"Ok. Don't be late coming home. Love you."

"Love you too babe." He smiled as he hung up and looked over to Mercury.

"Thanks for coming out man. Wasn't sure how much stuff I was going to find."

The silver haired man shrugged. "Of course bro. What are we looking for anyway?"

Jaune sighed as he walked over to the back door of the white cinder block building, and pushed it open.

"Promise not to laugh?"

He tsked. "Bro, you know I can't lie to you like that."

Jaune chuckled as they entered the dimly lit room, filled with shoddy metal shelves holding up collections of... everything really. He saw bowling balls, suits, various bags lying around, tools... this might take a minute.

"I'm thinking about getting back in shape for the Huntsman test at Beacon."

Mercury stilled, and almost dropped the pair of boots he'd started playing with.

"You what now?"

"I know, I know, it sounds crazy, but it's something I wanna try." He held up a metal chest piece. "This look good to you?"

Merc shook his head. "That's an imitation, you can tell because - wait - why do you wanna try?"

"The ass kicking wasn't reason enough?" Jaune asked as he shuffled through a shelf of... pauldrons? He thought they were called pauldrons.

"Yeah, but... being a Huntsman is dangerous."

The blond shot his friend a playful glare as he tried to fit one of the pieces to his shoulder.

"Not you too! I'm already going to get this lecture from Cindy." He complained.

Merc sighed and pointed. "Not that one, the one next to it."

"Thanks."

The man hummed. "She's not wrong though. I mean, you don't need to be a Huntsman to fight."

"You're right." Jaune said as he tried on a pair of rough work gloves. "But I want to be able to protect my family Merc, from whatever."

"Jaune, no one blames-"

"And maybe for me too, you know? I mean, I love everything about my life." He nodded to himself as he pulled on a second pair of gloves, this one forming to his hand. "But it was a dream of mine, and it kinda got cut short. Besides, it's not like I don't have the time."

"Yeah, but-"

*~ I see a red door and I want it painted black. No colors anymore I want them to turn black. ~*

Jaune's Scroll sang, and he held up a finger.

"One sec, Merc. Audio only, he's a weird one." Jaune mumbled as he held the Scroll to his ear. "Yello?"

Mercury watched as the Jaune listened to someone talk animatedly into the Scroll.

"Addie, are you ok? You sound upset."

*Addie?*

"Nah, I give everyone nicknames."

*Who the hell is Addie?*

"No, I'm not calling you the 'Red Viper,' that's ridiculous. Also, I don't wanna get technical, but aren't you a-"

The phone practically exploded with angry chatter, and Jaune pulled his ear away, shaking his head at Mercury.

"Ok, ok Addie, I get it. The faunus thing is off limits."

Mercury's eyes widened. *No fucking way.*

"I'm guessing this is about the girl."

Jaune mouthed, "lady problems," to him.

"Of course she was angry, I never said it was going to be easy! What'd you say to her anyway?"

Jaune groaned at the response.

"Addie, you didn't! No, you can't start with, 'I forgive you!' You're lucky that she didn't stab you."

*This is some bullshit.* Mercury thought as he tapped his foot impatiently.

"Oh, she did try to stab you? Ok, I admit, that seems a bit extreme. Were you at least wearing something besides your black suit and that ridiculous mask?"

HE hadn't gotten dating advice from Jaune. Granted, he hadn't asked, but still!

"No, it doesn't make you look cooler, it makes you look like someone that got rejected from Twilight. What did you say after that?"

The blond ran a hand down his face in frustration.

"Goddammit Addie. Look, I'm going to send you the name of a friend of mine that's a relationship counselor. His name is going to throw you a bit, but he's good."

This Adam dude was edging in on HIS time with Jaune. He needed to figure out a way to tip the scales...

"Yeah, 'may the fires of the revolution burn forever in your heart' too buddy. Bye."

Jaune sighed as he hung up the Scroll.

"Those two are a handful." He muttered.

Then it clicked. He knew what he could do. Something that Adam wouldn't.

"Hey bro, you need a trainer?"

---

Of the sights she could have seen when her and Emerald pulled the car into the driveway, she could honestly say that this was not one she expected. Nor one she was ready for.

There, in their yard, in front of the Gods and everyone, was a shirtless Jaune, being put through what she could only be described as a... prison workout, by Mercury.

"Come on bro! Eight, nine, ten." The silver haired man called out as Jaune performed pushups on the grass, before yelling. "Up, up, up!" And holding up boxing mitts for her husband to strike.

"Emerald." She said, without looking over.

"Ma'am?"

"What am I watching?"

The girl sighed. "I think it's Jaune and Merc just being weird. I don't know anymore."

"What side of Jaune's chest is his scar on?"

"The right, why-" The girl cursed.

"Eyes away please, that's enough for you."

She got out of the car and leaned against the door, watching the show. On one hand, she appreciate it for its... aesthetic value. On the other hand, there was almost certainly foolishness behind it.

"My knight!" She called to him. "What are you doing?"

He turned and smiled at her. She loved that smile.

"Oh hey baby, I'm just-"

Mercury slapped him on the side of the head with the pad.



"Hands up man."

Jaune rolled his eyes. "Let's take five Polly."

Merc snorted in amusement and began stripping off the pads.

Her knight turned to her again. "Just getting a work out in."

"I can see that. Is there a particular reason why it's in our front yard? We can get you a gym membership."

He tsked. "Nah, we don't need to do that. Besides, there's more room for activities out here. Right Merc?"

"Activities." The man agreed.

Her eyes narrowed. "And what do the armor and weapons I see strewn about the yard have to do with these, 'activities?'"

He chuckled nervously. "Oh, you know..."

"I don't know."

He sighed. "Well, maybe I was thinking about trying out for Beacon this upcoming semester? Just a little bit."

"You what?!" She hissed.

He raised his hands up defensively. "Now, I know you don't want me to get hurt, but hear me out."

Her mind raced. Jaune COULDN'T go to Beacon. It would ruin everything.

"So, I know Glynda pretty well..."

"Who is Glynda?!"

Emerald sighed as she made her way over to Mercury.

"How did you let this happen?" She hissed.

"It just kinda happened!" He whined.

"It doesn't just happen! What did you tell him?"

"Mercury promised to help!" Jaune shouted, gesturing towards the man.

"You understand you're dead, right?" Em informed him.

Cinder's eyes narrowed. "And what qualifications does Mercury say he has?"

"I'm going to do something respectful with your ashes, like throw them into the face of a shitty dad." She comforted.

"He says he taught jazzercise back in the day!" Jaune shot back.

Emerald shot him a look. "Jazzercise?"

"I panicked!" He said.

"Goddammit Merc, if we die because of your daddy issues, I swear-"

"Leave it Em. He wanted help, I can help."

"Not that kinda help." She growled.

"Jaune, Huntsman don't jazzercise!" Cinder shouted back.

"I know, but I can do this!" He argued.

"It's dangerous Jaune!"

"So's Vale!" He said, pointing towards the city.

"Honey, you don't have to do this for me, I'm ok." She said, tiredly.

"But I do! Baby, I want to be able to protect this family."

"You're part of this family! I need you to be safe too."

He sighed and his shoulders slumped. "Cindy, listen. It's not like it's happening. I still have to get in, and we both know that's probably not going to happen."

She could feel her treacherous heart strain under the disappointment on his face.

"Jaune..."

"But, please baby, I need to try. I need you to believe in me. However unrealistic it is." He pleaded, pain etched on his face. He desperately needed approval. HER approval.

Her heart, the terrible, fragile thing it was, broke. She couldn't speak for a moment, torn between what she should do, and what her heart would let her do. She swallowed and nodded.

"Ok baby..."

He perked up immediately, and she'd be damned if her heart didn't too.

"Really?"

"Yes, but I have conditions..."

She didn't get to any of them out. Her husband was on her in an instant, squeezing her in a fierce hug.

"Thank you! Baby, this means a lot to me."

She wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his shoulder.

She knew what she should have done. She should have crushed his dream outright, but...

He always had a way of making her weak.

She just hoped they'd survive it.

---

She shuffled around the bathroom in her favorite hoodie, his, getting ready for bed.

It had been a long day. It had been a hard day. She was exhausted.

She'd pulled Mercury to the side before he'd tried to take off, and informed him in no uncertain terms that her husband was to get stronger under his tutelage, but under no circumstances was he to pass the Huntsman test. His life depended on it.

She'd had Emerald check into this 'Glynda,' and sure enough, it was THE Glynda Goodwitch, the woman directly below Ozpin at Beacon. Gods, but how was it that Jaune knew everyone?

Speaking of the cheeky thief...

She held up the box that the girl had slipped into her grocery bag without her noticing, an unmistakable green 'E' scrawled on the box. It certainly explained why the girl had been so insistent that SHE be the one to put the groceries up. If Jaune had found it, he would have lost his mind.

She wouldn't let him get his hopes up like that.

It was impossible. She *knew* it was impossible after what she'd been through. Jaune had always accepted that, never judged her for it, despite how disappointed she knew he was.

"Cindy, you coming to bed?" She heard Jaune call.

But still...

"Just a minute my love." She called back.

The test only took a moment, but the wait somehow seemed to stretch on forever.

All she needed was for what she knew to be true to show up, so she could sleep in peace.

The second line seemed to mock her, and everything she knew, everything she was, as it appeared.

She couldn't be a mother. It was supposed to be *impossible*.

She fell to her knees, and for the first time in a very, very long time, she shed tears. The bitter irony being the she couldn't tell if they were from joy or grief.

"Baby, are you ok?" He called out in concern.

She strained to keep her voice steady.

"Yes my knight, I'm on my way. Everything's fine."

No matter how often she did it, she always hated lying to Jaune.

Cinder Fall was a monster.

She knew this.

And now, she knew she was very, very afraid.

---

## **The Fleet**

**" Fleet ho!" Demy called down from his place in the crow's nest, pointing towards the horizon.**

**The captain spoke quietly and quickly to Burk, who nodded and adjusted course, steering the ship towards a collection of dots**

in the distance.

The boy perked up next to me. "What is it sir? To what do we head?"

I grin and clasp the lad on the shoulder. "Boy, we've found it! The Fleet!"

" The fleet of what, sir?"

I laugh. "Why, the Fleet of better authors! We stand not yet among them, but we can SEE them lad."

" But who rides among the Fleet sir?" The boy ask.

" Let's go and see!" I say cheerily, as I push him to the railing. "Look boy, look out and see them in all their glory!"

Our gaze settled on the ships, growing ever closer as we cut through the water. They came in all shapes in sizes. Manowars loaded with enough firepower to withstand any assault from rival ships, treasure galleons loaded to the brim with comedy gold, ships of dark wood that cut deep into the water and feels alike.

" It's amazing." The boy breathed.

" They're all there boy, the Lefous, the Myareskas, the Imyoshis, the College Fools. Our own crew stands amongst them as well! See there, the Bear of black and white's own 'Charismatic,' Crooc's 'The Profession,' our own captain's 'Counseling!'

The boy hummed. "That last one seems... risque, sir."

I tsk. "Like you wouldn't board it. There be no shame here, boy."

I watch as his eyes widen. "Sir, what is THAT?" He ask, pointing towards the center of the Fleet.

**" Ah, you've spotted Coeur's fleet. There's a good lad."**

**" It's massive!" He exclaimed.**

**I grunt. "Size isn't everything."**

**" I don't believe that to be true, sir."**

**I cuff the lad playfully. "Cheeky brat! Keep that up and I'll ditch you for a journal format."**

**The boy grins. "You can't write journals."**

**I sigh. "Nay boy, I cannot." My eyes stain against the sun, trying to find THE ship. "Damn." I curse.**

**The boy looks up at me with concern. "What is it sir?"**

**" We are looking for a specific ship boy, one that lies deeper in the Fleet apparently. We must press on. The captain already makes preparations."**

**True to my word, the captain calls for Bear and the Amorous Father to take to the sails, for Demy to keep watch, and for Graves to ready the arms as Burk steers us on.**

**" Sir." The boy says, concern creeping into his voice.**

**" Aye lad?"**

**" The Fleet sails into a storm."**

**" That it does lad."**

**" But our ship is much smaller than theirs." He tries to explain. "Theirs seem made of such sturdier materials, tested in the waters again and again."**

**" Aye lad, that all be true." I admit.**

His eyes are wide with fear now. "That is the largest storm I've ever seen. We shall be destroyed."

I chuckle. "I told ye, boy. It's about faith. I believe in this ship, and now we will put her through her paces. And if we don't make it? Well, it's been an honor."

" But sir, I don't want it to be over."

I give him a small smile. "Aye, me neither. Guess we'll just have to sail on."

The boy nods slowly in acceptance, then jerks a thumb back towards the rear of the ship.

" By the way sir, what ship has latched onto us?"

I look back over my shoulder at a rough and battered dingy, tied to our own ship with a thick length of rope.

" Oh, you mean the Tauradonna? Yeah, guess we're taking her with us now too." I shrug. "Who'd of fucking thought?"

" Language sir."

" Aye boy."

---

## Meeting the Family

Cinder Fall was a monster.

She knew this. She also knew that her feet refused to take another step towards the door her knight, and wasn't it funny how fast he'd become that, stood in front of.

"Jaune, I don't think this is a good idea."



He raised an eyebrow. "You mean us not telling them we're dating? I agree, but it was YOUR idea."

She shook her head. "No I mean us doing this at all. Let's just go home." She pleaded. "I'm not ready for this."

He laughed and made his way over to her, taking her hand in his.

"Cindy, it's the holidays, there's no flights back to Vale for days. Besides, they're going to love you."

"How do you know?" She asked defensively.

"Cause I do." He said as he delivered a peck to her lips.

Damn him.

She sighed and nodded. "Ok."

"It'll be fine, you'll see." He comforted as he rapped on the door. There was silence for a moment before:

"Nobody's going to get the door!? Fine, let the guy in the chair do it!" A voice complained.

A moment later, the door opened to reveal a middle-aged man, strong of build, and his golden beard flecked with grey staring up at them from his wheelchair, with piercing blue eyes. His face immediately split in a grin.

"Son!"

"Dad!" Jaune cried out as he rushed forward into a hug.

She shifted awkwardly behind them, not sure how to introduce herself. Luckily, Papa Arc solved the issue for her.

"Dammit Jaune! Why didn't you tell us you were coming?"

"We were on standby, weren't sure if we'd catch a flight."

"We, huh?" The elder Arc peeked around his son at her, a warm smile in place. She could see where Jaune got it. "This must be your neighbor that you told us about."

Neighbor, huh? Well, they slept next to each other, so she supposed that technically that was true...

"Yeah, let's me borrow sugar when I need it." Jaune said, with a wink back at her.

Her mind ground to a halt. *How much more obvious can you ge-*

"Oh, that's nice of her. Miss..."

Apparently, Jaune inherited his density from his father too.

"Fall, but please, call me Cinder."

"Arthur Arc. A pleasure." He said, shaking her hand before spinning his chair and rolling back into the house. "Prep yourselves." He warned.

"For what?" She asked Jaune.

"JAUNE'S HOME!" The man bellowed.

"That." Her boyfriend said with a shake of his head.

A chorus of squeals and voices assaulted her ears.

"MY BABY!"

"JAUNE!"

"DID HE BRING US STUFF?"

"DID HE BRING A GIRL?"

What did she allow herself to be dragged into?

She stepped into the Arc household, and immediately so much about Jaune made sense. Battered wooden floors were covered with mismatched rugs, which in turn had mismatch and broken in furniture. Knick knacks and pictures covered almost every inch of the wall. It should have appalled her, she certainly wouldn't allow it in their apartment, but it was also... charming, in its own way.

Her thoughts were quickly interrupted by a horde of blonde women pouring into the room, and promptly tackling Jaune to the ground with a yelp.

"Hey guys, come on! Give me a bit of space! I missed you too!"

The assault continued to play out before her before a stern, but warm voice called out.

"Girls! Let your brother breath!"

Her gaze shifted over to a beautiful woman with long, blonde hair, who looked much younger than she guessed she actually was. The matriarch, she decided... the one to impress.

Jaune panted as found his feet.

"Thanks mom. Like a pack of Beowolves, I tell you!"

The woman tsked. "If you would come home more often, it wouldn't be like that." She nodded towards her. "Jaune, are you going to introduce us?"

"Oh! Right, sorry." He cleared his throat and motioned towards his sisters, starting at what appeared to be the youngest, and working his way up. "This is Vivi and Sapphire, the babies."

"Hey!"

"Violet and Lavender, the twins."

"Nice to meet you." The two echoed.

"Rubin, the troublemaker."

"Yo."

"Cere, the good one."

"Enchanted."

"And Crystal, the oldest, and a pain in my-"

"Watch it."

He laughed. "And finally, my mom. Victoria Arc."

The woman dipped her head.

"And this is Cinder everybody. My, uh, neighbor."

"A pleasure everyone." She said as sweetly as she could.

Victoria smiled. "Well isn't that nice? You brought your 'neighbor.'

*Uh-oh.* She did a quick scan of the faces in the room, of the girls, the eldest were staring at her with open suspicion.

"Jaune, won't you be a dear and go help your father in the kitchen? You know how much of a mess I make. We'll keep you friend... entertained out here."

This had been a terrible decision.

"Sure thing mom." He said, giving the woman a peck on the cheek as he passed.

"Come on boy, you can tell me about the ladies in Vale you've got your eye on."

Victoria Arc rolled her eyes as the two made their way to the kitchen.

*Ah, a kindred spirit.*

"Why don't we all take a seat?" The older woman asked, motioning toward the ring of couches and chairs. She wasn't oblivious to the fact that she was directed to a very isolated chair. One that looked suspiciously like it was in front of a firing line.

"Now, isn't that better?" Victoria smiled warmly as she settled. "Why don't you tell me how long you and my son have been... 'neighbors.'"

It was awfully warm in here.

"A few months."

"My, and he's already bringing you home. You work fast dear."

"I-"

"How old are you?" Crystal cut in.

Cinder scowled. "I don't think-"

"What do you do?" Cere asked, much more gently.

"I'm in acquisitions." She explained. "Real estate and rare items mostly."

"There any money in it?" Rubin asked, earning a gasp from Cere.

"Rubin, that's-"

"A considerable amount." She answered.

"Cool."

"That's good. You can support yourself, that's a good sign." Victoria said.

"And you're just neighbors?" Crystal asked, disbelief clear on her face.

"Yes." She answered defiantly.

"Interesting." The older woman said, before turning towards the kitchen. "Jaune! Can you bring..."

"Cindy!" He shouted back.

"Cindy some tea? I think she's thirsty, the dear."

Crystal's eyes locked with hers. "Cindy, huh?"

"We're very friendly neighbors."

"I'm sure."

Jaune appeared from the kitchen, cup and saucer in hand.

"Here you go, Cindy."

"Thank you, Jaune." She tried not to growl.

"Jaune, while you're here, why don't you tell us how you two met?" Victoria asked.

He winced, and her eyes widened. They'd been over this, 'I found her bleeding out' was not a good 'how I met you story.'

"I... uh, found her on a street corner, and helped her out. Gave her a ride."

Or he could make her sound like a hooker. Her grip tightened on her cup.

"Awww. That's so sweet!" Vivi, the youngest, intoned.

"Fascinating." Victoria deadpanned. "Go see if your father needs anything?"

*No! Don't leave!*

"Sure." The blond nodded and disappeared back into the kitchen. His mop of hair had barely disappeared from view before it started again.

"For real though. How long you guys been banging?"

She choked on her tea.

"Rubin! You can't just ask that! You have to ask how long they've been making love." Cere explained.

Gods, but she was going to murder Jaune.

"Girls." Mrs. Arc chided. "I've raised you better than that!" She gave Cinder an apologetic look. "I'm sorry about that dear, we believe you. Crystal can you get her a set of the holiday ears?"

The eldest sister grinned. "Sure thing, mom."

Cinder's eyes narrowed. This sounded like a trap of some sort.

"Holiday ears?"

Victoria nodded. "Certainly, you've never heard the story of the Huntsman who delivers presents to all the children on his sleigh pulled by magic rabbits?"

She was almost entirely certain NO ONE had ever heard that story.

"Can't say I have."

Victoria Arc shrugged. "Must be a country thing. Ah, thank you Crystal!" She said, as she accepted a pair of rabbit ears from the girl.

"Now, as the guest, it's tradition that you get to wear the ears... because you're so special you see."

*Bullshit. Rabbitshit. Whatever.* She ground her teeth. It was the perfect trap. She couldn't say no without being rude, but she still didn't understand the consequences.

"Thank you." She half-growled as she accepted the ears and put them atop her head.

She felt ridiculous.

"There we go." Mrs. Arc said, before calling into the kitchen again. "Jaune, honey, can you come help us?"

"Yeah sure, what do you guys ne-"

The words died on his lips as he exited the kitchen, and his eyes latched onto her, his mouth wide open.

*What was he doing!?*

"Jaune?" She asked carefully.

"Cindy..." He swallowed. "I... ears... wow."

*There's no fucking way.*

"Jaune." Victoria called to her son. "Jaune!" She snapped her fingers in his face, finally breaking his stare.

"Oh, sorry mom. What'd you need?"

"I forgot dear, go back to the kitchen." She said with a smile, watching him nod dumbly, still a little in shock, before stumbling back toward the kitchen. The older woman shook her head. "Dem Arc genes." She muttered before turning back to Cinder.



"You've got spunk dear, and that's a requirement in this family. You can keep the ears by the way, happy holidays."

"Thank you." She responded weakly.

"Don't worry about it. Just make sure you're wrapping more than presents before there's a ring on that finger."

## Other Monsters

I'd like to take a minute to thank some people. There's now a beautiful art piece for this fic thanks to Aikiyun (at deviantart) that wouldn't have happened without our own Captain Spooky Nooodle or A Stereotypical Gamer (go read their stuff). Also, Burkion, Demetrion, and ray9868 for all the help and suggestions. Really the whole WIP discord server.

Another note, Burkion, our very own navigator, has started his own KnightFall story, for those of you that have taken a liked to the pairing. 'Down to the River,' which I can assure you is well written (I've read it!). More details at the bottom.

Now, onto the question on everyone's mind...

Is this story comedy or serious?

Yes.

Thanks to Cr00cy as always for keeping this insanity in check... check-ish

### Chapter 8

#### Other Monsters

---

Cinder Fall was a monster.

Adam Taurus knew this.

He also knew something was off. She was agitated. She was rushed. She was angry.

As much as he hated the phrase, she was an animal backed into a corner. All which meant that she was especially dangerous.

He'd have to tread carefully.

"I don't think I fully understand." He said.

She hummed from her place across the small conference room table. "I don't think I see what there's to misunderstand. Your forces are required a bit earlier and in greater numbers than what we originally discussed."

"I don't recall agreeing to much of anything at all."

She sighed. "Adam, Adam, Adam. We both know that you were always going to take the deal. It's the only way that you'll get what you want."

"I find it interesting that you assume that you know what I want. Arrogance is truly a powerful human trait." He shot back.

She smiled a joyless smile. "My arrogance? My dear Adam, take a moment to truly absorb your situation. You are a terrorist, a known terrorist. What would happen if I let your name slip to the authorities?"

He stiffened as she continued.

"And even if I didn't, even if I let you continue to play your games of cat and mouse with the Atlesian security forces, how long before they catch up to you? What will you accomplish in that time? Your forces are outcast by their very nature. You may be able to prick the skin of society, but you will never pierce its heart." She leaned across the table. "You need me. You need my power to accomplish your dream. You just don't want to admit it because I'm human. If you ask me, that's the height of arrogance."

He growled. "You-."

"Do not interrupt me!" She hissed. "I am telling you what the terms of the deal are. Do not mistake me Adam, this is no longer an offer."

That time is past. This is a hostile takeover. You will kneel, and through kneeling you will achieve your dream." She tilted her head to the side, studying him. "Paradoxical, isn't it? The idea that you must be bound to be free? Don't worry, I'm familiar with the feeling. Now, what do you have to say?"

He fought to keep his anger in check, fought to choose the words that would put him back on equal footing with the woman... without inviting a fight that he couldn't win.

He chose poorly.

"Your husband seems to think there's another way."

Her visage darkened, and he felt both a chill run down his spine and the room begin to heat. When she spoke, it was in a cold, low tone.

"I will tell you this once, Adam Taurus. If you ever try bring my family into your life again, rest assured that I will make yours a part of mine."

He stilled. Blake.

She smiled softly. "It's paradoxical, isn't it? Love has freed you, and yet it has made you a slave. Again, I'm familiar with the feeling." She leaned back in her seat. "Now, you're going to stand up, walk out of this room, and make the appropriate calls. Roman will be expecting your men tonight."

He flinched. "That man-."

"Is necessary for both our goals, and will remain untouched. I will contact you again when I require your assistance." She gestured to the door. "We are done here."

He silently rose, his head bowed in defeat, and made his way to the door. His mind raced with the possibilities and consequences of the

meeting. So much so, that he completely ignored the dark-skinned girl passed him in the hallway, making her way to the door.

Emerald popped her head into the room, wincing as she spied an exhausted looking Cinder.

"That bad?"

"You're supposed to knock." Her mentor informed her.

"He left the door open."

The woman sighed. "What can you expect from one who was raised in a barn?"

Emerald snorted, covering her mouth with her hand. "That's bad. That's really bad."

"I have been known to be so upon occasion."

Emerald smirked. "Yeah, I guess we have. He looked pretty shaken, think he'll give us what we need?"

She hummed. "Yes. Adam is a driven man, but not a terribly complex one. He will do what he believes is best for him and his. As must we all."

The thief nodded. "So, what's next?"

"We continue with the plan as scheduled. We'll infiltrate the school and-."

"Ma'am." She injected hesitantly, watching Cinder stiffen in irritation. "I meant, what are we going to do about the baby?" She took a slow step forward. "How are you feeling by the way?"

She watched as the woman's expression softened, and she sat back with a sigh.

"Tired... irritable." She grimaced. "Emerald, we are on a timeline, and the two weeks since I found out have been less than productive. If we do not achieve our goal before my pregnancy starts to show, we will surely be destroyed. Salem did not make a contract with a pregnant woman, she made a pact with a killer. She will not be pleased to find out that one has been replaced by the other."

Emerald swallowed. "Will... do you think that we'll be ok if we can pull it off?"

"WHEN we succeed Emerald, we should be too indispensable to discard." She sank in her chair. "That is my hope anyway." Gods, but she hated hope. It was so weak.

"Maybe I can use my Semblance. Hide that you're pregnant from them." The green-haired girl tried.

Cinder raised an eyebrow. "Even if your Semblance worked on people at those ranges, I wouldn't gamble my life trying it on Salem if I were you. She's... different."

"Yeah..."

A silence fell over them, with Emerald shifting from side to side uncomfortably till she broke.

"Have you thought of any names?" She blurted out, snapping her mouth shut immediately after.

The other woman huffed. "My, we're bold today, aren't we?" She slowly smirked. "Of course I've been thinking of names. If I'd spent half as much time planning as doing that, we'd probably own Vale by now." She drummed her fingers on the table. "I think I like Ash for a boy, and Ashley for a girl."

Emerald barked a laugh, which Cinder silenced with a look. "Oh, you're serious..."

"Why wouldn't I be serious?"

"Isn't it a little... on the nose? I mean Ash, Cinder, it's just kinda..." She trailed off as Cinder continued to stare her down. "You know what? I love it. It's the best name." She quickly amended.

"And what names do you have in mind, pray tell?"

"Ummm....Onyx maybe? You know, cause it's like a black rock, like it got burned."

Cinder rolled her eyes. "Oh, you chose a stone. Why am I not surprised?"

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?"

"Emerald? Onyx? Really, you have to be more subtle."

The thief blushed. "It's not like that!"

"I suppose next you'll be asking if you can be the godmother." She drawled.

Emerald coughed. "I mean... am I not?"

Cinder scoffed. "Maybe Adam was right about the arrogance thing. Why would you assume that?"

"I, uh... well, what other girls do you hang out with?" The girl sputtered.

"Emerald, I want you to remember that Jaune has seven sisters, SEVEN. If you think that you're going to beat all of them out for the position of godmother, you have my permission to try. We'll do something tasteful for your funeral."

The dark-skinned girl shrank a little. "Oh... right."

Cinder sighed. "I do suppose there's always room for another aunt however, Gods knows the child will already have a horde of them."

Emerald perked up at that. "Really?"

The woman in red smiled softly. "Yes, you may be Auntie Em, if it suits you. You're awfully excited about this. Should I worry about you trying to steal my children in addition to my husband?"

The green-haired girl blushed. "I... I just never got one. A family I mean... it sounds nice."

Cinder hummed. "It frightens me."

Emerald cocked her head to the side. "Why?"

"Emerald, have you ever imagined me to be mother material? Even for a moment?" When silence met her question, she continued, her hand drifting to her belly. "What do I have to offer this child?"

"You've done alright with Jaune." The girl offered.

"Jaune has done the heavy lifting there, we both know it. Keeping secrets has been my main concern." She answered bitterly.

Emerald bit her lip, trying to figure out how to phrase her next question, before deciding to risk being blunt.

"When are you going to tell him?"

"About me or the baby?"

"Yes, but mostly the baby for now."

Cinder crossed her arms on the table, and rested her chin upon them. "I don't know."

The thief winced. "He needs to know."



"You think I don't know that?!" She snapped, causing the girl to flinch back. She sighed, sinking back down into her arms. "I know, but you know Jaune. He'll be so excited. He'll want everyone to know. But... but what if I can't?" She swallowed. "This wasn't supposed to be able to happen. What if the baby doesn't..." She couldn't bring herself to finish, looking away from her apprentice.

Emerald stepped forward carefully, slowly extending a hand till it rested on her shoulder.

"It's going to be ok. Jaune will be ok, trust him. We'll figure it out." She smiled softly. "We always do."

The dark-haired woman looked up at her with tired eyes. "I'm scared Emerald. I was supposed to be done being scared."

"I know. Me too."

The woman sighed, resting a hand atop hers. "Emerald, I'm sorry."

The thief looked down at her in confusion. "For what?"

"I've been many things to you, but a friend is not truly among them."

"You saved me. I'd still be on the streets if not for you." She retorted.

Cinder scoffed. "I used you. You have been considerably kinder. Something I've taken as a weakness on more than one occasion. What I'm trying to say is... thank you. You're a good friend..."

She smiled warmly. "Anytime."

The woman in red shot her a small smirk. "Despite your sexual attraction to my husband."

She tsked as she whipped her hand away from the woman's shoulder, causing her to chuckle.

They'd be ok.

They just had to be.

---

Mercury Black was a profoundly broken man.

He knew this. He'd come to peace with it... as long as peace meant outburst of unspeakable violence.

What he also knew, was that he was profoundly screwed.

He dipped under a swing from Jaune's practice blade as the blond marched forward, trying in vain to land a hit on the graceful kickboxer. He was still a ways off from doing so, but he was getting closer, and at an alarming rate. Sure, his movements were choppy and mechanical, and his feet were out of place as often as not, but the man had taken to the sword and shield quickly, coming forward aggressively and with purpose.

On one hand, he felt proud that his friend had come so far in just a couple of weeks. On the other hand, he had always been a fan of his organs being where they were, and every step Jaune made towards Beacon was another towards his own grave.

He danced away as Jaune attempted to bash him with a backswing of his shield, sliding out of the way of the follow up thrust as well. The knight in training was getting good, too good. He had a solution of course, it'd been staring him in the face since the spar started.

Jaune was too aggressive. He tended to leave himself open and leave his rear foot behind when advancing, widening his stance too far. It was a common mistake for those that hadn't been hit hard in sparring often, and easy to fix. Just a few solid blows here or there would teach the necessary lesson. But... there was another option. He watched again as Jaune lunged forward, stretching his rear leg out, tightening the tendons there. All it'd take was the right kind of kick, placed carefully, and that knee would buckle. Jaune would walk with a limp for a while, maybe have a few problems later in life, but

he wouldn't be at Beacon, and he'd be safe. All he had to do was pull the trigger.

Jaune grunted as he drove forward, swinging at Mercury in a downward arc. The silver-haired man stepped in, and caught the blond at the wrist, jerking him off balance. He took aim with his kick.

Jaune would understand. He knew he'd understand.

The blond grunted as his boot planted itself in his stomach, sending him flying backwards and onto his back with a thud.

Goddammit. It would have been so easy.

He sighed. "You ok, bro?"

The blond coughed as he slowly sat up. "What kinda jazzercise class did you teach again?"

He smirked. "An aggressive one."

Jaune shook his head. "Ok sensei Black, what'd I do wrong?"

He should lie. He should tell him anything besides what his weaknesses were. There had been a lot of things he should have done recently.

He sighed and plopped down on the grass of the Arc-Fall front lawn next to his friend.

"You're being too aggressive, man. Also, you're too stiff when you're attacking. You're trying to force it."

The blond chuckled. "I thought the whole force thing was kind of key to fighting."

Mercury smiled. "Directed force. Purposeful force. You need to be loose. You need to flow. It's not the hit you see coming that does you

in, it's the blow that seems to come out of nowhere that really hurts." He explained.

"Flow? Like water?"

Mercury shrugged. "Sure, as long as that water is kicking someone's ass, knock yourself out. More accurately, knock them out."

Jaune laughed. "Anybody ever tell you that you're a real poet, Merc?"

"Once or twice."

Jaune shook his head. "Thanks again for this, man. I don't know what I would have done if I tried to pick this all up on my own. Probably would have been a disaster."

Rub it in why don't you?

"No problem. I know it can be frustrating, but you're making progress, even if it doesn't feel like it."

The blond sighed. "You think it'll be enough?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. Hard to say, I'm no Hunter." That was technically true. "Why do you want to be one so bad anyway? Honestly, it seems like kind of a pain in the ass."

Jaune hummed. "Probably. I think part of it is that it's what my dad used to do."

"Isn't your old man in a chair?" He winced, there were probably more polite ways to have phrased that. Turns out 'freelance assassin' was a job that didn't come with an etiquette book.

Jaune shrugged it off. "Yeah. Got into a bad Hunting accident when we were kids."

"You're not really selling me on this job, man."

The blond laughed. "It's the power to change things, Merc. To be strong enough to make a difference. Besides, everyone wants to be like their father, right?"

No, no they did not.

He sighed. "I ever tell you about my old man?"

Jaune shook his head.

"He was strong, real strong, but you wanna know what he also was? An asshole." He spat on the ground. "Used to knock me around something fierce. Thought it made him a big man. Thought it made him strong. It was just me and him too, so it wasn't like there were a lot of ways to get away from it."

"Brothers Merc, I'm sorry." Jaune said, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"It's ok. It's over now, he's gone."

"What happened?"

"Sudden heart failure. Guess his lifestyle finally caught up to him." Also not untrue, blunt force trauma notwithstanding. "But that's not why I brought it up. Look man, being strong is cool and all, but it doesn't mean anything on its own. You can be tough and not really help anyone, and you can be a normal guy, and change someone's life. You're a good dude, Jaune. I don't think you know how important that can be."

"Being a good dude wasn't enough the other night." The blond countered.

"That night shouldn't have gone down the way it did." Cinder never needed to know he said that.

"Exactly!" Jaune exclaimed. "If I'd just been stronger..."

"Bro, who do you think is more powerful, the strongest Huntsman in the world, or his wife?"

"Uh, the Huntsman?" Jaune tried.

"You sure? Who's the one who decides where they live? Who advises the Huntsman on what jobs to take? Tells him when he's eating?"

"Huh, never thought about it that way."

"Your dad go against your mom a lot?"

Jaune laughed at that. "Not if he knows what's good for him."

The silver-haired man held out a hand. "There you go."

Jaune shook his head. "Only one problem, there's no Huntsmen in our little family. No one with THAT kind of power."

Brothers, if you only knew.

He sighed. "Yeah, you got me there, bro."

The blond cocked an eyebrow at him. "What brought all this up anyway? Cindy ask you to talk to me?"

"Nah, just feeling all deep and shit today. I guess what I'm trying to say is, you don't have to be strong to make a difference..."

You've already done that.

He ran a hand through his hair. "... and being strong doesn't make you a better person."

Gods knew he was a testament to that.

Jaune smiled at him and gave him a playful shove. "I get you sensei Black, and I appreciate it." He hopped to his feet and held out a

hand. "Now, you gonna help me get in shape, or have I tuckered you out by being your punching bag?"

Mercury smirked as he accepted the hand and let himself be pulled up.

"I think I got a few rounds left in me. Let's get to work."

He wondered what they'd do with his ashes after Cinder murdered him. Hopefully something respectful.

---

Cinder Fall was a monster.

It was known far and wide. Only one person in her life didn't have any clue of what Cinder Fall truly was, and she'd kill to keep it that way.

Her hand found the handle to the front door of her home, with its simple, yet stylish, one story ranch design and meticulously cared for flower bed. She pushed through the entrance to her home and transformed, just like she always did.

"Honey, I'm home!"

"I'm in the kitchen!" Came a familiar voice, one that sounded like home.

She weaved her way through the living room and walked into the kitchen, a smile coming to her face as she saw him. He was wearing the same 'kiss the cook' apron he always did, bending over to check something in the oven, with his mop of blond hair and deep, gentle blue eyes, and that dumb smile on his face, the one that was reserved for her.

"Hey baby, you're late. Trying to make a fellow jealous?" He teased.

She smiled. "Maybe I like to keep you on your toes. Don't want to become boring, after all."

He raised an eyebrow. "Big bad boss lady be boring? I don't think so."

She smirked as she slid up to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "So, you're saying I excite you then?"

"In more ways than one."

"Good." She purred, resting her head on his chest. "You'll have to show me later."

He chuckled. "You're bad."

"You have no idea."

He rested his head on hers. "Long day?"

She sighed. "We're down to the wire on a lot of things at work. I'm getting worried."

He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "Sorry baby. Why don't you go get changed and relax? Dinner's almost ready."

She kissed his neck. "Good, I'm minutes away from hangry."

"The Gods have no fury like a woman unfed." He laughed. "Go baby, I'll be there in a sec." He said, turning her out of the kitchen with a swat on the behind to send her on her way.

A few minutes later, she emerged from her room, clad in the uniform of conquerors. Sweatpants and a Pumpkin Pete hoodie. His hoodie, her hoodie, their hoodie.

She made her way to the living room, plopping down in her chair. The same rich, dark leather recliner that Jaune had shown her she'd like. He was good at that.



"How was training?" She called to the kitchen.

"It was good! I think we're making some real progress!"

She'd have to have a word with Mercury about that.

"Hey babe?"

"Yes?" She answered.

"Did you know about Mercury's dad?"

"... Yes, I did. What brought this up?"

"He told me today. I had no idea."

"I don't think he likes to talk about it baby. I'm surprised he told you."  
She'd have to find out just how much he told him.

"Yeah, I think he was trying to tell me that being a Huntsman isn't the only way to make a difference. That's what the guy was, right? A Huntsman?"

"Yes." Close enough.

"Sounds like a piece of work. I wish I could've been there for him.  
Could've have been strong enough to stand up to the guy."

"I think Mercury appreciates you being there for him now, baby." She replied.

"Yeah..." A loud beeping filled the house. "Chicken's done!" He announced proudly. "Just needs a few minutes to cool."

"Yay!"

"Anything exciting happen at work? Em doing good?"

"Had a rather intense meeting, but I think we all understand each other now. Em is good, we had a good talk today."

"About what?"

Shit.

"... Girl stuff."

"Ah."

Thank Gods that still worked.

Her apron clad knight appeared shortly after, his weapon of choice, a martini, in hand.

"Here you go, baby." He said with a warm smile.

Her world froze. She stared at the glass. Such an innocent thing. A part of their little ritual for every time she came home late. So familiar, and yet now so alien.

He cocked his head to the side as he held out the glass. "Cindy?"

She swallowed. "No thank you."

His face filled with concern. "You always have a drink on days like this. You not feeling ok?"

She nodded numbly.

"You want something else?"

She slowly shook her head.

"Cindy, I don't understand."

"I can't." She whispered, her hand trailing up to her stomach of its own accord.

She winced when she heard the gasp. One that deepened when she heard the glass clink of the floor. His arms were around her in a instant.

"Oh Gods! You're serious!? Please tell me you're serious!" He ranted, as showered her face with kisses.

"Jaune!" She cried out in protest.

He pushed off her immediately, holding his hands high in the air.

"Oh Gods, did I hurt you!? I hurt you!"

"Jaune, I'm not an invalid. You can touch me!" She laughed despite herself. "You're just smothering me!"

There were tears flowing in streams down his face now.

"When?"

"Two weeks ago... I wanted to be sure." She explained.

"Baby, I thought..."

"I know." She could feel them burning streaks down her cheeks as well. "I thought so too."

"It's a miracle." He whispered.

A very dark miracle, the more cynical side of her brain might have said, but in this moment? In this moment, that voice was silent. This moment was too perfect for it to be anything but.

"Yes." She choked. "I'm going to be a mommy."

He shot forward again, holding her as she wept unashamed for perhaps the first time in her life, tears of joy flowing freely.

"You're going to be a mommy." He whispered to her, kissing her cheek.

"And you're going to be a daddy." She whispered back.

He stepped back. "Oh Gods, I'm going to be a daddy." He started to pace around the room, talking to himself. "We've gotta go to baby classes, I've gotta baby proof the house." He gasped. "I've got to tell my family! I've got to tell everyone!"

"No!" She cried out, throwing her hand out. He shot her a confused look. "I'm still scared about what might happen." She explained, and his face fell. "I think it'll be ok, but I'm still a little scared. I don't think I could deal with the disappointment. Please baby, can we keep it quiet... just for now." She pleaded.

"Of course." He comforted, as he strode over and embraced her. "It's going to be ok, baby. I promise. Arc's word."

"Thank you." She whispered.

He squeezed her slightly. "Do you need anything baby?"

She opened her mouth to say no, and froze.

"Baby? You ok?" He asked, concern back in place.

She nodded. "Baby, you know what I've been really craving?"

"What? I'll get you anything!"

She laughed. "The Pumpkin Pete's dark chocolate ice cream. Could you grab some if it's not too much trouble?"

"Coming right up!" He exclaimed, as he kissed her forehead. "I love you so much!" He yelled as he bolted for the door.

She barely had time to call back, "I love you too," before the door slammed hard enough to rattle the house.

Good, he'd be gone for hours. That ice cream had been discontinued years ago.

"You have until the count of five to get the fuck out my house, before I burn you alive." She hissed.

He chuckled. "My, my, where's your sense of hospit-

"Five. Four. Three-."

"I wouldn't!" Watts cried out hurriedly, appearing seemingly out of the wall, as he deactivated whatever stealth device he was using. "I've got people on hubby dearest."

"Show me." She challenged, holding an inferno in the palm of her hand.

He smirked as he slowly pulled out a scroll, revealing a live feed of their car, racing toward the nearest supermarket.

Watts tsked. "I do believe he's speeding. He should be more careful, that can be dangerous."

"What do you want?" She growled.

He smiled wide. "Well, isn't that the question? It's certainly changed in the past few minutes, I assure you of that." He laughed. "Honestly, it all started with our little tiff a few weeks ago about the fire at the docks. I assumed you were hiding something. Maybe something that I could hold over you head and make you a bit more compliant during our little council meetings." He shook his head. "But then one of my little friends let me know something interesting. Apparently, a certain Jaune Arc applied to Beacon... and listed himself as married to Cinder Fall."

He scoffed dramatically. "Now, I said, 'that's impossible.' Impossible, but still interesting, so I had him pass along the address listed, and stationed someone to watch." He explained. "And wouldn't you know

it? This Jaune Arc DID appear to live with a certain Cinder Fall. But, it was so impossible though, that I had to see for myself." He grinned. "Gods, but it was worth it."

"I'm going to be a mommy!" He howled. "Brother's, but never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that THE Cinder Fall-."

"Get to the point!" She snapped, fingers digging into the chair.

He chuckled. "Oh yes, wouldn't want old hubby to come home too soon, would we? He has no idea does he? Honestly, I'm impressed, that level of deception is beyond even I." He shook his head sadly. "But to have such a glaring weak spot on the other hand..."

She was on her feet in an instant. "If you touch him-"

He pushed the scroll back in her face. "Now, now, 'Cindy.' Let's not make idle threats."

She seethed. "I promise you, no force on heaven or earth will save you from me."

He raised an eyebrow. "Not even our Queen?"

"Whatever happens to me, she won't be fast enough to save YOU. That's all that matters."

His eyes widened in surprise. "Well, aren't we fatalistic? I assure you that there's no need though. What I have in mind is right up your alley, and doesn't require anyone to die. Well, either of us." He corrected.

"What. Do. You. Want?" She hissed.

He chuckled. "Why, for you to be what you are! A monster. You've always been such a talented little murderer, and I have a long list of people that I'd prefer forgot how to breath."

"A hitman then."

"Don't worry, I'm sure you can tell Jaune you're in liquidation now. Even better, most of the names are right here in Vale, so you don't even have to travel! See how kind I am?" He asked. "Of course, we'll work our way up the chain eventually. I've always wanted to pay dear Jimmy back for my expulsion from Atlas."

"And you'll leave the others out of it?"

"Gods, you care about the other two as well? My, how the mighty have fallen." He shook his head in mock sadness. "Don't worry your pretty little head though, you kill for me, and I refrain from killing for you? Aren't I kind?"

"Leave."

He tsked. "I think I deserve a thank you."

"I'll thank you to get the hell out of my house."

"Say it." He demanded, finger hovering over a button on the scroll.

Her eyes widened, and she ground her teeth together. "Thank you."

He nodded. "See how easy that was? Well, best be off. I've got a hit list to finish compiling." He said, turning a making for the door. He stopped as his hand hit the handle, looking back over his shoulder with a smirk.

"Oh, and congratulations on the baby."

She could hear his laughter echoing in her ears long after he'd disappeared from her doorstep.

She fell to her knees in her living room and screamed.

Cinder Fall was a monster.

But to Jaune, she was simply his wife...

... And she'd kill to keep it that way.

---

## **The Maelstrom**

**The wind and rain whips at my face, as waves so tall that they came clear over the railing rocked the ship to and fro. My eyes search the deck desperately, trying to ensure that our crew is yet intact. I spy Crooc and Graves clutching onto the railing desperately, and see the erie captain holding onto the wheel as a soaked Burk yells direction in his ear.**

**The boy! Where is the boy?!**

**My eyes fall upon him, and I let out a sigh of relief. I see him trying to scream something to me, but it is lost in the wind. I painstakingly shuffle along the railing until I'm beside him.**

**" What is it, lad?" I shout above the storm.**

**" Sir! The storm is too great, the ship can't handle it!"**

**I clasp a hand on his shoulder. "She'll hold, lad!"**

**He shakes his head vigorously. "The sails of flirting and banter are being ripped away from the ropes of sexual tension." He yells.**

**My eyes travel upwards, watching as the Bear of Black and White and the Amorous Father desperately fling themselves from net to net, trying to close the sails, to save them for when we hit sunny waters.**

**" They'll hold!" I answer.**

**" But sir!" He argues. "I can hear the hull, it is screaming under the pressure! The characters that make it up, they can't take it!"**



My ears take in the groans and shrieks of the hull as it is battered mercilessly by these dark waters. My gaze is set upon the crow's nest, trying to find Demy through the rain. I wave up at him, begging for good news. He crosses his arms in an X. There is none yet.

" They'll hold!" I answer again.

The boy scoffs. "How can you know that!? What ship is it that we search for!?"

I look at the boy for a moment, before catching his collar, and dragging him close.

" Do you wish to know, lad? Truly?"

" Yes!" He begs.

" The HMS Stress Relief." I say, barely a whisper in the storm.

His eyes widen in fear. "No!"

" Yes!"

He shakes his head with a fierceness. "That's madness! You're mad!"

I cackled above the wind. "And you followed me! You chose this boy! Who is madder between us?"

" I didn't know! How could I!?" He defends, before pointing back to the sea. "We'll never make it! The storm is only getting worse, and the mast, she won't hold!"

" She'll hold!" I snap back. "The mast of emotional connection is strong!"

" What is the connection!?" The boy demands. "How can you know!?"

**" Because I have faith boy!" I point towards the dark wood of the mast. "But you do not, not yet anyway. So go I say, and check it yourself!"**

**He shoots me a look of disgust, before crawling his way over to the mast. He slowly pulls himself upright, gazing intently at the dark grains, trying to discern their pattern.**

**I wait for it, I know what is coming.**

**He turns back to me, terror clear on his face.**

**" It's fear sir! You've built a ship upon fear, fear of loss and judgement!"**

**" Nay lad! You're only on the surface!" I shout at him, as I slide my knife across the deck into his hands. "You must go deeper!"**

**I watch as he drives the knife into the mast again and again, desperate to peel away the dark wood.**

**" Deeper boy! Ye must find the core!"**

**" That's what she said, sir!"**

**Gods, but I love that boy.**

---

## **Relationship Counseling**

To say that Adam Taurus was uncomfortable would be an understatement.

Not only would it be an understatement, but it would be one on par with, 'Grimm can be irritable, the SDC and the Fang were having a bit of a tiff, and Ilia had some mild interest in Blake Belladonna.'

Speaking of which, the girl in question was seated at a small, wooden chair next to his own. The fact that she hadn't stopped

glaring at him since they arrive certainly added to his uncomfortableness, but it was not its source.

No, that honor was reserved for the giant of a man in a tacky white suit, sitting opposite of them behind his large, oak desk, smiling wide.

"Well, welcome y'all! How can Big Daddy Bane help you today?"

"I'm not calling you that." He snapped.

"Adam!" Blake hissed.

The giant held up a hand. "It's ok Blake, sometimes the name makes people uncomfortable in this setting. In this setting, you can just call me Father Bane."

"I'm not-"

"Adam, you promised!"

He sighed. "... Father Bane, I'm still a bit uncomfortable with that name."

"And I'm a bit uncomfortable with the fact that you decided to wear a Halloween mask to a counseling session." He shot back. "How you doing by the way, Blake?"

"Meh, I'm here."

"Wait." He started. "You know each other?"

"Yeah, we're in the same book club." Big-Father Bane, explained.

"I'm immediately more uncomfortable."

"Adam! This is your councilor, that your friend recommended!" Blake argued. "You said you liked him."

"Jaune is a brother of the revolution..." He grumbled.

Bane raised an eyebrow. "Does he talk to himself about the 'revolution,' often?"

Blake groaned. "All the time!"

He coughed. "The revolution is everything!"

Father Bane hummed. "I think we're getting toward the root of the problem. You value work more than Blake."

"That's not true!" He snapped. "She just doesn't understand!"

Bane nodded, deep in thought. "Have you tried hitting the bitch?"

Adam balked. "That seems grossly disrespectful."

"Wasn't talking to you." Bane answered, looking to Blake.

She shrugged. "I stabbed him."

"Goddamn girl! Slow down!" The giant shook his head. "Alright, let's start this easy. We're going to do some roleplay."

Blake opened her mouth to respond, and Bane cut her off.

"Not THAT kind of roleplay. You kinky fucks can do that one your own time."

"You know, I find your language extremely unprofessional for a licensed counselor." Adam informed him.

Bane shot him a confused look. "Licensed?" Then his eyes grew wide with understanding. "Right! I'm a licensed counselor, just like Jaune said! Also, you can keep your fucking opinions to yourself, Ferdinand."

"The hell you say-"

The giant clapped his hands together. "Right! So, Blake, I want you to start us off. Pretend to be Adam, and talk to 'Blake.'"

She raised an eyebrow. "Be Adam?"

The giant nodded. "That's right."

She shrugged. "Ok." She took a deep breath and lowered her voice. "I'm Adam. I hate humans. So much so that I can't tell the difference between an SDC guard and a ninety year old grandma."

He scoffed. "I don't sound like-"

"Blake!" Father Bane shouted at him. "Wait your turn!"

He sighed and crossed his arms as Blake continued her impression. "I'm super possessive, and can't take a hint that my girlfriend needs some space. Or, you know, maybe just not to blow up a moving train!"

Bane raised an eyebrow. "Wait, what?"

Blake continued. "I'm going to start a relationship with a thirteen year old girl, cause I'm creepy as fuck."

"No seriously, I'm starting to get concerned." Bane tried again.

Blake ignored him. "You know what I really like? Is when someone sticks a finger up my-."

Bane shot across the table. "Ok! Thank you 'Adam.'" He said to Blake, before looking desperately to Adam. "'Blake,' would you like to go next?"

"Would I?" Adam growled, before raising his voice several octaves. "My name's Blake! I have severe daddy issues, which is super weird, considering the guy was always there for me."

"Hey!" Blake shouted.

Adam ignored her. "Didn't stop me from becoming a terrorist though, or demanding that I be allowed to call my boyfriend 'daddy,' in private or in public!"

Bane scowled. "See, I feel like we need to circle back to the first part of that statement."

"But wait, there's more!" Adam shouted.

"Or just ignore me, that's a sign of a healthy relationship for sure."

"I have a collection of toys that would put most sex stores to shame, and the only thing I like more than trying to use them all is my weird rape fantasies. And if you're thinking I mean against me, you'd be sorely mistak-."

"Aaaannnnnnnd we're done!" The giant shouted across the table, eye wide with panic.

The couple nodded anxiously.

"What do you think?" Adam asked.

"Can we be healthy?" Blake cut in.

Bane scoffed. "Hell no! Y'all fucked up."

The two faunus sank back in their chairs, a mixture of disappointment and relief playing across their faces.

"But." The giant continued. "Y'all too fucked up for anybody else. You're going to be that couple that people whisper about at parties. 'Does he hit her? Is she cheating on him?'" He sighed. "But y'all gonna to stay together, cause no one else can handle your crazy asses."

"So... we can make it work?" Blake asked hesitantly.

"Define work." The giant said.

"We can tolerate each other till we have an explosive, possibly violent, fight, then amazing make up sex." She offered.

Bane sighed, running a hand down his face. "Yeah, that's about y'all's speed."

"Is that your professional opinion?" Adam asked.

"Fuck yeah it is."

"Oh Adam! We're going to ok!" Blake cried as she wrapped her arms around him. "Thank you so much Bane!"

The giant shook his head. "Y'all get the hell out of my office before you try to bang on my desk or start a civil war. I'm not sure which would result in more casualties at this point."

Adam stood, and slowly bowed to the man. "You are forever a friend of the revolution." He said, before making his way out of the room, hand in hand with his darling.

"Brothers above, I feel dirty." Bane muttered, before pressing a button on the intercom on his desk. "Brenda! Get me Qrow! We're going on a bender tonight!"

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**Burk: Yarr, this be Navigator Burkion here! I be highjacking this here fic to cross promote my own KnightFall story, which has already set sail! She be "Down To The River", and below is an excerpt. Now to hope I'm not thrown overboard.**

**Annnnnnddddd an except if you're interested:**

**NOTE: THIS IS PART OF BURK'S STORY, NOT PART OF 'A MONSTER'S MARRIAGE!**

**JUST FOR GOOD MEASURE... READ THE ABOVE NOTE.**

---

Being ambidextrous was one of the most useful skills that an assassin could have, Cinder Fall mused. Few were born with this rare talent, she certainly hadn't been, but it was a very useful skill to learn. She had just started opening fire on her current target when an unfortunate variable had made himself known. A variable taken into account, as Cinder was born no fool.

The bullets from her primary gun in her right hand tore into the young Neon Katt, a pro athlete that had decided to snub the wrong person. Her left hand had already closed around her secondary gun, a different make and model with a different set of ammunition, as the door began to open. Neon Katt's musically inclined partner, Flynt Coal, was apparently coming into the room to ask his significant other some question or other.

Whatever it had been didn't matter any longer as one bullet tore into his shoulder and one carved a groove across his skull. Cinder clicked her tongue in disappointment, knowing that her left hand wasn't quite as strong as her right. Neon Katt she had taken by surprise, slipping into the room from a side window and had died instantly. Flynt, on the other hand, was still suffering on the ground with only two of the five shots finding their mark.

Only she misjudged just how serious a head injury he had received, Flynt surging up. He swung at her wildly, remaining arm flailing. Cinder sidestepped the blow, a lamp exploding into a thousand pieces. A smile crossed her features, Flynt's eyes wide with fear and confusion. He thought he could fight his way out of this, how cute.

With a quick, aimed, shot to the head he was put out of his misery. No witnesses, no fuss, no worries. She doubted that he had any idea of what hit him, not that it would have mattered anyway. Cinder was pleased that she had the foresight to equip both of her pistols with silencers, which while it did not completely mute the sound of a gun, did help mask it. Checking the weight of her pistols she knew she would have to reload them as soon as she could safely eject their magazines. She stalled for a moment to empty two more rounds into Flynt's back, his body spasming in turn. Always make sure.



# Truth, Fear, and Family

Well Cr00cy, we sail on. Time to find out who's still on board.

## Chapter 9

### Truth, Fear, and Family

---

Cinder Fall was a Monster.

Big ole capital M.

Neo knew this. She had some clothes that she STILL couldn't get the smell of smoke out of that proved this to be true. Well... smoke and a few other things. She wouldn't have guessed that people smelled like bacon, but hey, you learn something new everyday.

Well, those guys were probably done learning, she supposed.

But that was all in the past. What was more important, was what Fire Bitch was doing now. It certainly looked suspicious, which fit with what the man had told her.

What man you ask?

Why, the one that she'd found following Blondie around town. Stalking was a crime after all, and if Neo was anything, it was a dutiful citizen, protecting her fellow citizens from harm.

What's that? Why was she following Blondie around?

That was clearly different. She was simply spending quality time with what was hers... without the other party being aware. See? Completely different.

Besides, she was bored.

What was so interesting about the man, Sir Screams A Lot, was that he thought he was being sneaky about the whole thing. Blondie certainly didn't notice him, but then, Blondie had more important things to attend to, like saying 'hi,' to everything with a pulse on the street.

SHE noticed him right away though, she was observant like that. She'd watched for the better part of a week before she decided that maybe she should get to know the man a little bit better. Maybe they could bond over their mutual interest in Blondie. She'd resolved to show him how to be sneaky first. It seemed like the neighborly thing to do.

A little bit of chloroform and a quick Semblance powered trip later, they were ready to spend some quality time together in Vale's warehouse district. She'd found that most people didn't travel around with chloroform on them, which seemed super unprofessional to her, but whatever.

Once they'd had the place to themselves, she decided that a game was probably the best way to break the ice... and maybe a few other things.

So, they'd started playing twenty questions! She thought it would be a lot of fun, but as it turned out, her new friend wasn't very good at it at all. In fact, he seemed VERY loud and annoying in his protest of her choice of game. Now, she thought that seemed rather rude, but never let it be said that Neo was a poor host. She picked a new game for them to play.

Operation.

Her new friend was FAR more enthusiastic about this one. He couldn't stop shouting thing like 'please don't stop!' at her. She might have added a word in that sentence somewhere, but that was only because she was having to focus so hard on the game! She'd started drinking partway through, after all.

People drank at parties, right?

Well, the sight of her drinking had set her friend off something fierce. So much so, that he'd started crying. She'd slapped herself on the head - she was being rude! She offered him some, and he jumped at the chance, practically begging for a taste. She wasn't sure why he was so surprised when she started pouring the alcohol all over him, but what really caught his attention?

When she lit the match.

And just like that, her new friend had decided that he wanted to play twenty questions again.

She sighed, some people were just hard to please. She thought it was a bit rude that he didn't even wait for her to start asking questions though, just started screaming out answers.

'My name is (INSERT INACCURATE STATEMENT HERE)!'

She hadn't given him a name yet, so he didn't have one.

'I was told to follow that Jaune guy!'

Did he mean Blondie? It was rude not to use people's correct names.

'I work for Watts!'

Well that wouldn't work. What would she call this 'Watts' guy? She shrugged, she'd decide when she saw a picture. Sounded like a an asshole though.

'I've got his contact info in my Scroll!'

She'd fished the Scroll out of the guy's pocket, and flipped through to this 'Watts.' Huh, guy looked like an asshole too. She didn't bother calling, it was probably a burner phone. Also, you know, the whole no speaky thing.

She pulled up a picture of Blondie on the guy's Scroll, an adorable one of him eating at a local cafe that she'd be sending to herself later, and tapped on it while mouthing, 'why?' Turned out the guy was ok at charades when properly motivated.

'His wife! It's leverage to get his wife to work for us!'

She'd scowled at that. Didn't he know that it was against the rules to lie in this game? Monsters didn't allow people to control them. Everyone knew that.

She'd decided that probably meant they were done with this game, so she picked a new one.

It was there, at the top of the ten-story warehouse building, playing hopscotch (well, he was covered in scotch, and she may have helped him a bit with the hop), that he'd earned his name. Sir Screams A Lot.

Good times.

Just for funsies though, she decided to go check up on Fire Bitch, she'd adopted her after all. She would have normally proved to be far more difficult to find, but thanks to the tracking device on SSAL's Scroll, she found her in record time.

She was sure that SSAL had been lying when she saw what Fire Bitch was wearing. That skin tight catsuit was clearly meant for some kind of roleplay with Blondie. It was super kinky. She approved, and resolved to buy one of her own after this was over. After all, if Blondie liked it...

But here's where things started going a little bit screwy. Fire Bitch didn't head back towards her house, where they could all play a rousing round of 'two people and a voyeur,' but instead slinked from shadow to shadow, making her way deeper into the city.

The real shitty part of the city.

She followed the woman through the dimly lit streets and darkened alleys, (did no one learn their lesson?), till they reached their destination, a run down bar in with a sign that read, 'Prince's,' hanging out front. She wasn't entirely sure what all Prince was up to, but if he ran a business on this side of town, she suspected that it was no good.

Her suspicions were confirmed when Fire Bitch blew the door off its hinges, revealing a room full of very surprised, suddenly sober men. One of them decided that what he wanted to do with his life was to reach for something under the table.

Well, we all have to go somehow, she supposed.

This was by FAR the most entertaining thing that she'd seen a long time. Whatever their disagreements about who sat where on the hierarchy of Monsters, she had to admit she enjoyed watching Fire Bitch work. The woman was an artist.

She danced through the gunfire, dealing death as she spun and dipped. Here, obsidian blades flew from her fingertips, burying themselves in the throats of a trio of men trying to find their feet. Here, a long, black scimitar cleaved a man in twain, splattering the back wall with a dark red. There, flames engulfed a group of men that were scrambling to bring their weapons to bare, reducing them to dark splotches on the floor. She watched with rapt attention as the woman bent over backwards, as if dipped by some invisible partner, allowing a bullet to pass over her, before spinning with effortless grace, her scimitar becoming a spear that she hurled into the man, pinning him to the wall.

Then there was one. The bartender scrambled over the wooden counter in front of him, stumbling his way towards the entrance, rudely trying to leave before the performance was complete. Fire Bitch just sighed, summoned a dark bow and arrow, took aim, and let fly. The dark shaft buried itself into the bartenders back, its head erupting from the other side, and sending a small spray of blood onto her face.

Like she said, art.

As such, she decided to show her appreciation by loudly clapping for the performance. She would have whistled too, but... well, you know. Either way, Fire Bitch seemed more than shocked to see her, her eyes as wide as saucers.

"What are you doing here!?" She hissed, nocking another arrow.

Well, that seemed rude.

What was she doing here again though? Oh yeah! She wanted to know what the hell was going on with Fire Bitch and this 'Watts,' real name pending, guy, and what it had to do with their co-owned blond. She decided to try to sign the question as best she could.

The dark-haired woman scowled. "The hell are you saying?"

She sighed. Some people just had no respect for the vocally impaired. She pulled out her Scroll and typed out her question politely as possible.

*What the fuck are you doing?*

"What I have to." The woman returned with a growl.

Neo rolled her eyes. Was there ever a more tired response?

"It's none of your business anyway." The woman said, as she slowly started to lower the bow.

Maybe a different angle? Something less inflammatory?

*Who the fuck is Watts?*

And just like that, the bow was back up, arrow pulled back.

"How do you know that name?"

Neo shrugged helpfully, and merrily started typing again.

*Why are you taking out his trash?*

"You don't know what you're talking about."

Did everyone suck at twenty questions?

*Found one of his guys tracking Blondie.*

Fire Bitch's brow furrowed. "Blondie?"

She sighed and went back to typing.

*Jaune.*

"That bastard." The woman growled. "I figured he'd be keeping someone on him."

It was Neo's turn to scowl.

*Did he say he was going to hurt him?*

Fire Bitch stared at her for a long moment, before finally lowering her bow again, letting it dissolve to ash.

"If I don't 'behave,' yes." The woman spat.

Neo's eye widened at that, and she typed in at a frantic pace, holding up her Scroll when she finished.

*Why isn't he dead?*

Fire Bitch scoffed. "It's not that simple."

Neo felt something stirring in the pit of her stomach that she hadn't felt in a long, long time. Real anger. Anger at this 'Watts' for thinking that he could threaten what belonged to her, anger at Stilts and Crop-Top from not dealing with Blondie's tail themselves, but most of

all at the woman in front of her. She should be dealing with this asshole, not taking out his trash. She was a Monster goddammit! Monsters like them took things, things were never taken from them.

*It's simple if you'd stop being a little bitch.*

The dark-haired woman's eyes narrowed as the sparks of flames appeared there.

"Watch yourself, little one. I need Roman, but I don't need you."

She knew she should be afraid, some small part of her brain that she rarely used screamed at her, but she couldn't bring herself to care. This dumb bitch was just going to let this Snidely Whiplash-looking motherfucker threaten her? Threaten them?

*Go get Blondie, give him to the stooges, and let's kill this motherfucker.*

"Jaune doesn't know! You know he doesn't know!" She snapped.

*Tell him.*

Fire Bitch barked a laugh. "Tell him what? Tell him that the life he knows is a lie? That he's married to a monster?"

Finally! They were speaking the same language! She held up a thumb in approval.

"He'll run." She stated simply.

*Then I guess he wasn't really yours, huh?*

"Listen closely, you multicolored bimbo-"

She was angry. Good, anger they could use.

"I have had it up to here with being insulted and belittled over the course of this week-" She half-roared.



There she was, the Monster she knew. They were almost there. A little bit more, and the woman would be ready to track down the man that dared to threaten what was hers, what was theirs.

"So if you think you're going to come in here, and tell me how to deal with MY husband, I'll show you a goddamn monster. Nothing, I repeat nothing, will come between me and my husband and child!"

The two women stared at each other for a long moment in silence, eyes locked. Neo's jaw worked up and down wordlessly, which was pretty standard, but...

Her child?

The smaller woman took a small step forward, and the other leapt back, flames springing to life in her hands. It all made sense now, the way she moved, the way she subtly guarded her midsection above all. Neo held up her hands in surrender, slowly extending one towards the other woman, like one might a deer. She had to know.

She took another step forward, her mouth formed in a silent shushing motion. The taller woman eyed her warily, hands held at the ready.

She was undeterred. She took another slow step, hand slowly extending towards the other woman's belly. She had to know.

The taller woman froze as Neo's hand gingerly, almost hesitantly, touched her belly. The smaller woman let out a silent gasp.

Neo had felt many things over the years. She had felt many a fading pulse, she had felt the feeling of someone's dying breath on her cheek, she had felt nothing at all as she stared down on many a still body. But never, ever had she felt this. She felt life. It was small, and it was fragile, but it was there.

In that instant, the two women understood each other with a crystal clear clarity, they would do anything to protect that life. It belonged to

them. They just happened to disagree on what that anything was. She knew what she had to do. She slowly typed out a quick message before showing it to the larger woman.

*I killed the guy.*

She pressed her hand firmly against her, and they blinked out of existence together.

---

Cinder Fall was a monster.

She knew this.

But she also knew that she was a very careful monster, always making sure that everything was in its place. Which is why her pulse started to rise when they popped into existence in a darkened room... and why she started to panic when its details quickly became intimately familiar to her.

It was HER living room.

She rounded on the imp with rage in her heart, and fire alight in her hands.

"You fucking bitch!" She hissed, watching with fury as the smaller woman popped out of existence, blowing a kiss to the corner of the room as she went.

"Cindy!?"

An icy terror froze over the burning rage that consumed her, and the flames died in her hands. Just like that, one simple word, her own name, and she could feel her world crashing down around her. She slowly, painfully turned to see him, as if drawing the action out would change the outcome. The sight broke her heart when her eyes fell upon it.

Jaune sat in his favorite, overly stuffed chair, a blanket covering his legs, and an empty tumbler and a small bottle of liquor on the table next to him, a bewildered expression on his face.

He'd waited up on her, he'd been worried about her. She wanted to reach out, she wanted to comfort him, but her body betrayed her, and so she stood, staring in horror at the love of her life as the questions started to spill from his lips.

"Cindy what's going on? Was that Neo? Did you have *fire* in your hands?"

Her mouth opened and closed wordlessly as her mind raced. Was there anything, anything at all that she could say that would change this? That would free her from this prison? His next set of questions extinguished the hope.

"What are you wear-... Oh my Gods, is that blood!? Are you ok!?" He shouted as he sprung from his chair, sprinting over to her and running his hands over her, searching for the wound that wasn't there. Finally, her body allowed her to do something. She gently reached up and took his hands in hers, her heart aching when she saw that his were now stained red. Such things just looked wrong on Jaune, he was too kind, too pure, for them.

"My love... I'm ok." She whispered.

He shook his head in confusion. "Baby, what's going on? Talk to me."

It was the last thing she wanted to do, she would, and had, killed to avoid it. She wouldn't lose this, no matter what it cost her. This was hers, maybe the only thing she'd ever really considered such, and she'd fight for it bloody tooth and nail. She swallowed, and started to speak, her voice shaking.

"Jaune, I-"

The realization hit her like a hammer. The last message that little bitch had shown her before she'd destroyed everything.

*I killed that guy.*

Her eyes widened in understanding and horror. She'd killed the man watching Jaune. *Watt's* man. Whatever pact that was between them was done. Her breath started coming in quick, panicked, pants.

She squeezed his hands painfully tight. "Jaune, we have to run."

He balked and leaned away. "What?"

"My love, I need you to go grab a bag, fill it with what you need, and only what you need. We're going to leave. Right now."

He shook his head and moved his hands to her shoulders, pulling her closer.

"Cinder, I need you to talk to me. What is going on? Why are you covered in blood? What are we running from?"

"Jaune, there's no time!"

"*Make* time." He demanded. "I am your husband. Talk to me. Tell me the truth."

She wanted to laugh, she wanted to cry. Didn't it sound so easy? Just tell him the truth? She'd rather serve the devil herself. But here at the end? There was nothing left to her, nothing else that would save him, and so for the first time in their marriage, she told her husband the truth...

"I'm a monster." She said, barely loud enough to be heard.

"What? Cinder, you're not making any sense!"

Her hands slowly rose up, grasping his wrist, and pulling his hands away from her as she stepped back.

"I hurt people, Jaune. I hurt people tonight, I hurt people almost every night this week, and I'll probably hurt people next week." She explained coldly, numbly.

He stared at her, uncomprehending. "Who? Who did you hurt? Why?"

Her mouth was dry, as she tried to put it into words. "The people I work for. They tell me who I need to hurt, and I do." She settled on.

"Who, Cindy? Who do you work for?" He pleaded. "Is it Vale PD? Beacon?"

There was panic in his eyes now, and it made her feel all the worse when she couldn't stop the bitter laugh that bubbled up to her lips.

"No... no, it's not Beacon." She took a deep breath, and took the plunge. "Jaune, we're planning to destroy Beacon."

It was his turn to take a step back. "What?"

"We've been planning it for years, decades, I'm sure. Far longer than I've been with the organization. The night I met you?" She swallowed, steeling herself. "I'd just finishing trying to kill a woman for her powers, so that I could see it done. Just got unlucky and got caught by one of Ozpin's pets. But make no mistake, these people? They will see Beacon fall."

"H-how? Why?"

"Adam, well, him and Roman. They've been providing us with the manning and resources we need to level the school, and bring Ozpin to his knees."

"Cinder... there are children there... how could they..."

"It's not just Beacon, all of Vale, really. Every man, woman, and child could burn, and it won't matter. Not to these people, Jaune. Those are the kind of people I work for."

He shook his head, letting out a nervous giggle. "You're kidding, right? Em and Merc are hiding in here somewhere. You could never..."

The look she gave him was one he'd never seen before. There was too much pain in it. His hand rose to cover his mouth.

"Oh, Gods..." He whispered.

"Jaune..." She said, reaching out for him, needing to touch him, to ease his pain. It broke her heart when he stepped back out of her reach, staring at her in shock.

"Who are you?" He whispered again.

"I am your wife." She pleaded.

"You are a fiction!" He snapped. "How long? How long have you been lying to me? Playing me for a fool?"

"Baby, it's not like that..."

"Then what is it like!? Is it like being told that your wife works in 'acquisitions'? Is it like waiting up in the middle of the night waiting for someone who's busy making sure that other people don't come home at all? Is it like that the woman that you thought loved you isn't even real?" He spat.

That, she would not stand for. She felt a heat filling her chest. Good, she needed to feel something.

"I love you, Jaune Arc, don't you ever say that to me again!"

"Or what? You'll 'hurt' me too?" He shot back.

"How can you say that!? I am your wife!" She roared.

"Cinder, I don't even know you! Is that even your name? Where does the real you end, and my wife begin?"

She put a hand to her chest. " *This* is the real me! No one else gets to see this, no one! You are the only one that knows me!"

He scoffed. "How could I possibly know you? You've been lying to me from the start!"

"To protect you!"

"I am your husband! We're supposed to be partners, equals in this, not whatever this is!" He roared, before shaking his head. "Why? Why do you work for these people? Why lie to me?"

"Because I'm scared! I've been scared my entire life, and I got tired of it!" She shot back. "Jaune, I pray everyday, to Gods that I don't believe in, that you never have to see the things that I have, to experience them, but a certain point... people break, and they either choose to be the victim or they choose to hurt people, and I got tired of being hurt." She shook her head. "I've done terrible, awful, things. Things that wouldn't let you sleep at night, much less let you sleep next to me, but they allowed me to be a little less afraid, because there were fewer and fewer people capable of making me a victim. These people? These people offered me the chance to never be afraid again." She chuckled bitterly and stared at the floor. "It was too good to be true, of course. They meant that I'd never be afraid of anyone but them."

She looked up, locking eyes with him. "But it's always been different with you. You make me feel safe, like I don't need to be afraid anymore, and you've never asked for anything in return, except for me. For once in my entire life, I've had something that is mine, a piece of real happiness, something I thought was a fiction. The thought of losing it, losing you... I'd do anything to stop it."

"Even kill?" He questioned, coldy.

"Yes."

He swallowed, running a hand through his hair nervously.

"Have you?"

"... Yes."

He cursed and turned away, breaking their stare. It was over. Just like she always knew it would be, like she had lied to herself, and told herself that she might be able to avoid if she played everything just so. She wanted to break, wanted to collapse, but she steeled herself. She might not be able to save them, but she could still save Jaune.

"It's ok." She whispered, voice slowly rising. "I was wrong, we don't need to go, *you* need to go. I've lied to you, and now you're done with me, and I'm done with you. We both got a bit of what we wanted in the end. You should just run. Go to your family, collect them and run as far as you can. I'll take care of things here, you don't have the stomach for what comes next."

He looked at her again, something new in his eyes, a mix of rage and confusion. Something very un-Jaune like.

"What the fuck did you just say to me?" He whispered.

If she could just push him far enough, he would leave, he would be safe.

"I said you're not strong enough to-"

"Not that part." He said, stepping closer towards her. "Cause you're absolutely right about that, but did you just tell me to run out on my family?"

"I-"

"Where do you get the fucking gall!?" He snarled, a rage unlike she'd ever seen on his face. "I may be a weak man, but I don't have to be strong for this. This is my family, and I'll fight for it, even if you won't!"

She gasped. "But you said I was-"



"You are my wife!" He roared, pointing to himself, before pointing to her. "That is my child. This is my family, and if you think that I'm the kind of man that will let someone take that away from me, or that I'm going to turn tail and run because you say so, then maybe you don't know me either."

"Jaune, they will kill us!" She pleaded.

He shook his head. "Only if they catch you. You should run, whatever you are, I'll only slow you down. Go, they'll find me, but maybe I can buy you some time. They won't kill us, they'll kill me."

"It's the same thing!" She roared back, grabbing his shirt and pulled him close. "My child will not grow up without a father, do you understand me? I am going nowhere." She could feel the tears running down her face now, burning hot streaks down her cheeks. "Don't think you've got some monopoly on caring about this family, you self-righteous prick." She buried her face in his chest. "You're a fool." She whispered.

"I know." He whispered back.

"We're going to die."

"Probably."

She felt his hands slowly make their way up her sides, before wrapping around her, and holding her close. She'd be damned if she didn't somehow feel safer.

"But I chose this, and you chose this. Maybe it's not real at all, but it's everything I have." He whispered.

"I'm so sorry."

"It's ok." He said, before shifting. "Well, it's not. We're not ok, not yet, probably not for a long time... but I'm going to find out if we can be... one day."

She pressed into him like it would save her. "I love you."

He squeezed her gently, as if she were fragile and he might hurt her, and she loved him for it.

"I love you too."

She pulled back, looking up at him. "Jaune... I don't know what to do."

"I do." He pulled out his Scroll, and started typing away with one hand, the other still wrapped around her.

Her eyes widened. "Jaune! Who are you talking to!?"

He grunted. "Em and Merc."

"My love, if they turn on us-"

"Cindy." He cut her off. "If these people are as bad as you say, they're going to go after them too. We can't leave them like that."

She swallowed. "But if they do..."

"They won't."

"How can you know? They're survivors, Jaune. They'll do what they have to, just like me."

He chuckled. "How's that working out for you? And I don't know, but I have faith."

"How?"

He shrugged. "Because they're family."

"You're a fool." She whispered, but made no move to stop him as he sent the message.

"Done." He said, before pulling up another contact and typing again.

"Jaune!"

"We have to stop the attack on Beacon." He declared.

She balked. "Jaune, there's nothing we can do, everything is already in place."

"You said it was Adam, right? He's the one that's leading the attack?"

"Yes, but-"

"Then I want to talk to him. Adam doesn't want this, I don't know if he ever really did. I think he's just trying to do what's best for his people."

"You're wrong." She told him. "This is everything to Adam."

"Not everything."

She scoffed. "Faith again?"

He gave her a small smirk. "More like insider info on this one."

"It won't be enough."

He shrugged. "We're dead anyway, right? Might as well swing for the fences."

"I married a fool."

He hummed. "I think I included that in the vows." He said, as he continued typing. "Speaking of the White Fang, I can't believe you tried to 'White Fang' me."

"Is that the movie with the-"

"The wolf dog that he has to chase away, yeah."

She huffed. "I hated it."

He snorted. "You hate all dog movies."

"I do, they're too sad."

He barked a laugh at that, and she shot him a look.

"Oh, I'm sorry." He teased. "Are we not allowed to laugh about this yet?"

"No, and what are you even going to say to him?"

"I have no idea."

She sighed, watching him pull up another contact on his Scroll.

"Jaune!"

He sighed and lowered the device. "Look, we're going to need all the favors we can get here."

"Who are you texting?"

"Neo."

"WHAT!?"

He shot her a sideways glance. "Really? This is really how you want to play this one right now?"

"She's a-"

"I am dying to know what accusation you're about to make, I really am." He drawled.

She huffed. "Why do you even have her number?"

He hummed. "You remember about a week ago? When you sent me out for that ice cream? She saw me in the store and helped me find something similar. Girl knows her ice cream."

"I'm sure her motives were entirely pure." She muttered.

He looked down at her and slowly shook his head.

"You are the woman I married."

She pulled him closer. "Always."

He clicked the send button, and lowered his Scroll.

"She'll be here in a few."

"Lovely."

He sighed and looked down at her.

"I like that outfit... minus the blood."

She gave him a small smile.

"I know you do."

---

Emerald Sustrai and Mercury Black were not good people.

They knew this.

What's more, they knew this about each other.

It's why they had both chosen to come to this meeting armed. They'd learned long ago not to take chances.

They walked towards each other slowly, under the flickering lights of the street lamps. They'd agreed on this place, because while not public enough to prevent the murder of the opposite party, it'd at

least make life a bit of a bitch for the surviving one. Priorities were important.

They stared at each other for a few moments, shifting nervously, before Emerald broke the silence.

"I guess you got Jaune's message?"

Mercury snorted. "Yeah, I'll say."

Emerald gave him a small smile. "It's definitely a very 'Jaune' message."

"I know. We're going to stop them. Do what you have to. Love you both." Mercury quoted with a smirk.

The tanned girl shook her head. "He's crazy."

"Yeah." He agreed.

The silence washed over them again, before Emerald broke it once more.

"So, I guess the only question now is... are you crazy too?"

Mercury chuckled, running a hand down his face.

"You know, I used to fucking hate you."

"Can't say I haven't felt the same from time to time." She admitted.

He nodded. "But, I traveled with you two sadistic bitches for awhile, and things started to change."

"To be fair, I'd call myself a masochist."

He laughed again. "Yeah, I guess you'd have to be." He shook his head. "Maybe I am too, but it started to be fun, a weird fun, but fun."

"Yeah."

"But it still never felt... right, I guess? It was always a means to an end."

"Till Jaune."

He nodded. "Till Jaune." He sighed. "Then stuff started to get fucking weird. Getting paid became... secondary. Maybe because..." He swallowed. "Maybe because I wasn't Mercury Black anymore. Maybe because I'd become Merc, just Merc." He looked up at her. "I like being Merc."

"Yeah... I like being Em."

"I like living too though."

She nodded. "Me too... and I intend to keep on living too."

He took a step back, subtly falling into stance.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah..." She smiled. "I'm going to be an aunt, after all."

He scowled for a moment, before his eyes widened in understanding.

"No fucking way."

"Very much fucking way."

"When?"

"Like, three or so weeks ago."

He shook his head as he considered the information, before nodding to himself.

"You know they're going to kill us, right?"

"They can try." She answered.

He laughed. "What are we going to do with their ashes?"

She tsked as she pulled out her Scroll and dialed Jaune's number.

"Something super fucking disrespectful."

---

## **Weathering the Storm**

**The ship groans as the waves slam home against the hull, stressing it till the point of cracking. The freezing cold water sprays onto my face, a stark reminder of the fate that awaits us should the ship fail us.**

**My gaze shifts to the crew, and I can see the fear in their eyes, the seeds of doubt. Yet they stand strong against the storm, holding desperately onto the ropes and rails as the winds whip against them. All eyes are locked onto one form...**

**The boy.**

**He hacks desperately at the mast of emotional connection with my knife, trying with all his might to peel back the dark wood of lies and fear to find its center, its core.**

**" Sir! It is too rotten! There is no end to it!" He cries out to me.**

**" Keep at it, lad! You've almost done it! You're almost through!" I encourage him, before I feel a hand fall upon my shoulder.**

**I turn and see Crooc looking at me with weary eyes, shifting his gaze towards to sea, and pointing towards a massive swell rising out of the deep.**



The tidal wave of rising action, come to smash our ship to pieces, if we do not sail strong and true.

" Well fuck." I grumble, as it gains speed and mass, rushing towards us.

" What was that, sir?" The boy shouts.

" Nothing, boy! Keep your eyes on your work! Nothing else matters!"

The wave continues to climb into the darkened sky, illuminated like some angry ancient God by the flash of lightning. We cannot stand against it.

" Sir! I... I think I see something!" The boy cries out in excitement.

" There's a good lad! Tell me, tell us all, what do you see?" I shout back.

The wave looms over us now, at least three times again the height of our ship. We watch in horror as the wave begins to break, ready to crush the ship in its watery grasp.

I can only stare in morbid fascination at the wave blots out the sky, shouting to the boy again.

" What do you see, lad!?"

The boy squints against the dark, holding his face close to hole in the mast he has dug.

" It's... sir... I think..." He gasp in understand. "It's love!"

No sooner have the words left the boy's lips, the mast explodes in a blast of light, ripping away the dark and rotting wood and throwing the boy backwards with a yelp. In its place stands

something new, something always there, but buried beneath the surface.

A gleaming mast of rich, warm wood, standing firm against the wrath of the storm. The ship lurches forward, driven onward by new, and true, purpose. The bow of the ship crashes into the wave, its planks screaming against the force of the wave as we attempt to cleave through, every mouth of the crew open in screams drowned out by the roar of the storm.

And then... we are through.

I cannot control myself any longer, and the strength flees my legs. I fall to my knees laughing hysterically as the boy limps over to me. I wrap an arm around him.

"Are you alright, lad?"

He shakes his head. "I am unharmed, sir. But I don't understand! There were too many lies, too much fear! How did we persevere?"

I grin and shake him. "That is because you still don't understand ships, lad! It's love! It's always been love! Love for each other, love for the family, love for what might be! No one is afraid unless they stand to lose, and they stand to lose everything! It is love, fear, and family, that is what we have built our ship on, boy."

He shakes his head again as he shivers.

"I don't know if I'll ever understand your ship, sir."

"But do you enjoy it, boy?"

"... Aye, sir."

I slap him on the back. "That is all I ask."

A great 'crack' fills the air, and we all snap our eyes towards the crow's nest, where Demy holds a pistol in one hand, and a black flag in the other.

"What does it mean, sir?" The boy ask, staring up at me.

"It means Demy has spotted a ship, lad. Let's see who it is."

We turn to see Burk raise his looking glass, looking to the horizon, before turning and whispering into the captain's ear. The spooky man nods once, then turns towards our anxious faces. He gives us two words, the only two we need.

"Stress Relief!"

The deck erupts in cheers.

---

## First Impressions

"So..." Mercury started, as he walked down the dilapidated and darkened street next to his partner. "What do you think he's like?"

The green-haired girl glanced around the street warily.

"I mean... when she described him, I thought, I dunno... dashing, dark, probably loaded." She watched as a raccoon and a feral cat fought over a candy wrapper. "But, this place seems, kinda..."

"Super shitty?" He offered.

"Yeah."

"I bet he's a badass." He said, "like 6'6," and 260 lbs... at least."

The girl tsked. "That's your type, not Cinder's."

He smirked. "I'd guess you'd know about not being her type, huh?"

"Har har, fucking har. You're hilarious."

"I try."

She sighed. "Try harder. Also, I think we're here." She said, as she looked up at the broken and battered apartment building standing before them, at least as many windows broken as intact. She took a deep breath. "Ok Merc, we need to... Merc! Focus!"

The silver-haired man whipped his head back towards her. "Sorry, but... I saw a toddler."

She squinted at him. "So?"

He shook his head. "No, you don't understand. I saw toddler, no parents, walking down the street alone."

"What!? Where?"

He shrugged. "I don't know! He just disappeared into the night!"

"Gods." She hissed, this is the shittiest of neighborhoods, this guy has to be pretty rough. "Ok Merc, this is the boss's boyfriend we're talking about, so I'm going to need you to fight against your nature and not screw this up, kay?"

He rolled his eyes as knocked on the scrapped and peeling door of the apartment. "Ok, mom. I think I can handle this."

"Sure you can." She quipped, as they listened to the sound of footsteps approaching the door, accompanied by an, "I'm coming!"

Mercury brushed of his shirt and put on his best winning smile. He was about to be professional as fuck.

He already started extending his hand as the handle turned and the door opened, no doubt to reveal the badass that he just knew lived here.

"Howdy!" Jaune greeted as he swung the door open.

"What the hel-" He grunted as Emerald slammed an elbow into his side. "-llllloooo, to you too!" He said, as the blond excitedly grabbed his hand and pumped it up and down.

"You must be Mercury!" He looked at the dark skinned girl. "And you're Emerald! Nice to meet you both! Cindy's told me all about you."

"Cindy?" Mercury grumbled, as Emerald pushed him aside.

"We've heard a lot about you too." She lied with a smile. "Thank you for having us."

"Of course!" He slapped his forehead. "Where are my manners? Please, come in!" Jaune said, as he moved back to reveal the apartment in all its glory.

Its single room, should be condemned, studio apartment glory.

"Oh... this is..."

So many good descriptions came to mind. A death trap. A crime against humanity.

She settled on, "... really nice."

He laughed as he led them in. "You don't have to lie, I know it's not much, but it's-"

"-ours." A very familiar voice finished from across the room. They turned to see Cinder sitting uncomfortably on a couch that had seen MUCH better days. "You're late." She stated.

Emerald shot ramrod straight. "Sorry ma'am-"

"Cinder." The woman in red corrected.

"Sorry... Cinder. We got a little lost. Some of the street signs seem to be missing."

Jaune tsked. "The raccoons must be stealing them again."

Mercury balked. "The fuc-" was about as far as he got before Emerald's heel crashed down on his foot, and he smirked as she let out a yelp.

"Oh well," she shrugged, wincing. "We're here now."

"Yes." Cinder agreed, motioning to two mismatched wooden chairs in front of the couch. "Why don't you take a seat? Jaune, my love, can you get the wine?"

"Sure!"

They slowly eased into the seats and stared in fear at the woman in front of them. She cleared her throat and spoke in a low, threatening tone.

"You will be respectable people in this home." She eyed Mercury. "Meaning that you will not be yourselves..."

"Why me!" He complained.

"You know why." Emerald shot back.

"... or there will be consequences. Dire consequences. Am I understood?"

They both swallowed and nodded, before Jaune returned with full glasses, taking a seat on the couch next to Cinder, and her face exploded into a smile.

"Thank you, my love. Do you need anything?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Were you still going to try to bake the cookies?"

She huffed. "Of course, I can handle it!"

"Ok..." He said slowly. "Just remember-"

"Jaune, honestly, it's a simple task. Wait here with Mercury and Emerald, and I'll handle it." She eyed the two. "Just remember to be yourselves, you two."

"Yes, ma'-Cinder." They chorused.

The three stared at each other in silence as she walked over to kitchen. Emerald nudged Mercury and nodded at the still smiling blond. Merc cleared his throat, and spoke in a painfully slow, loud voice.

"So, Jaune, do you live here?"

The man cocked his head to the side. "Yep... for a few months now."

"That's good." Mercury loudly assured him. "It's good to have a place to live."

Emerald shot him a confused look.

"Yeah, I always thought so." Jaune agreed.

"We..." Mercury slowly motioned to himself and Emerald. "Like your home. It is nice." He said, slowly pronouncing every word with care.

Emerald's eyes widened in understanding, and she kicked at her partner.

"Jaune." Cinder called from the kitchen.

"Yeah, baby?"

"... which one of these devices is the oven?"

He signed and smiled good-naturedly at them. "One sec, guys," before rising and walking over the kitchen.

"What the hell!" Emerald hissed as soon as he was gone.

"What?" Mercury asked, confused.

"Merc, he's normal, not slow!"

"Oh... but, I mean..."

"Goddammit Merc, if you say you thought they were the same thing."

"Hey, I didn't exactly get out a lot with good ole daddy Mc'Asswhooping, ok!" He defended. "It's not like you guys are any better!"

She tsked. "I can have a normal conversation."

"Prove it."

"Fine!"

"What are we talking about?" Jaune asked, causing the pair to jump.

"Nothing!" Emerald assured him. "Everything ok over there?"

He chuckled. "She's hopeless."

"I heard that Jaune Arc!"

"Love you, baby!" He turned back to them. "She's a real fire hazard."

They chuckled nervously, and he grinned.

"And I'm not just saying that because she's hot." He finished, with a far too pleased wink.



Mercury's hand was about halfway up for a high-five when Emerald swatted it down, giggling at Jaune's joke.

"Oh, you're too funny." She cooed.

It was Mercury's turn to stare at her in confusion.

"Heh, Cindy hates the puns."

"Well, I think they're hilarious." She said, leaning forward placing her hand on Jaune's, sticking her chest out more than strictly necessary in the process.

Oh shit. "Uh, Em?"

She shot him a glare. "Mercury, I'm trying to talk to Jaune."

"Yeah, about that..."

"Jaune..." They heard Cinder's voice call hesitantly from the kitchen.

He chuckled. "Yeah, baby?"

"... Where is the 'cookie' button on this machine?"

He snorted.

"Jaune Arc! You will hold your tongue and come help me if you know what is good for you!"

"I thought you liked my tong-"

"Jaune!" She roared.

He cackled as he rose to his feet and crossed over to the kitchen. Emerald just shot Mercury a look and mouthed, 'what the duck'... or something similar.

He shook his head. "Holy shit! You're casing him!"

She balked. "Am not!"

He snorted. "Em, you're like, two minutes away from asking that guy if he wants a 'happy ending' to get into his pants."

"I'm a thief, not a prostitute, you asshole!"

He shrugged. "Yeah, and pockets are in the pants, so my point stands. Also, check YOUR pockets."

She tsked and reached into her pocket. "There's nothing-" She sighed, and pulled a small paper card out of her pocket.

Mercury's eyes widened. "Is that a half-full sandwich reward card?"

She hung her head. "Yes."

"Em, I've seen some pretty heinous shit, but stealing a poor man's sandwich card? Brothers, that's fucking low."

"I didn't mean to!" She snapped. "It just happened!"

"What just happened?"

"Son of a bitch!" Mercury yelled, cocking one of his legs on reflex, before settling down. "Dude! How do you do that!?"

Jaune raised an eyebrow. "My apartment is like, the size of a shipping container. It's about two steps from the kitchen to here."

Emerald sighed. "Look, Jaune, we're just a little bit nervous. Cinder's our boss, and we need this to go well."

He shrugged. "That's all? Don't worry about it, Cindy puts on a big act, but she's harmless."

She stared at him for a second, before slowly nodding.

"Sure, let's go with that."

Mercury shrugged. "You seem like an alright guy, how'd you meet the boss lady?"

"It's a funny story, actually. I-" He paused, and sniffed the air. "Smoke?" He whipped his head back towards the kitchen, where flames had already claimed the oven and part of the wall. "Cindy!"

"I did nothing wrong!"

"Then why is the kitchen on fire!"

"It's a complicated process!"

"They're cookies!"

"They were going too slow, so I helped them!"

He shook his head. "Helped them? How did you-... never mind, just go!" He turned back towards the two mercenaries. "We gotta go!"

"But what about the fire!?" Emerald asked. "Don't you have an extinguisher!?"

The way Jaune laughed as he sprinted after his girlfriend confirmed that no, no he did not.

A few minutes later, as they stared up at the burning building, Emerald looked over to the blond.

"Did other people live there?"

He laughed. "That death trap? Nah."

"Should we call someone?"

He shrugged. "Fire department will be here in like... an hour."

"Bro, your neighborhood fucking sucks... no offense." Mercury observed.

Cinder tsked. "Now we can move somewhere tolerable, Jaune."

He sighed. "Yeah, guess so. Think we can afford it?"

"Don't worry about it." Three voices answered him.

Mercury shook his head and leaned over to his partner.

"You don't think it's going to get any weirder than this, right?"

She snorted. "There's no way."

# The People We Want To Be

Cr00cy, I can't believe they're still here.

## Chapter 10

### The People We Want To Be

---

Cinder Fall was a monster.

Jaune Arc knew this.

But what he also knew, what that she was *his* monster, and he'd fight tooth and nail against anyone that thought that they were going to hurt his family.

Unfortunately, what defending his family to the death currently looked like, was standing awkwardly next to his wife, waiting for a phone call.

He glanced over to her. "How do you even start working for an evil organization? Is there like, a job fair?"

She shot him a look. "Jaune."

"I'm genuinely curious."

"It's complicated."

"Cinder." He deadpanned.

She sighed. "You get recruited mostly, unless you're crazy, and no, I am not crazy." She cut him off as she saw his mouth open for the quip. He shrugged.

"You said her name was Salem? Is she a mob boss or something?"

She gave him a flat look. "If I didn't love you, I'd be insulted. No, she's not a mob boss." She rubbed her temples. "What is that movie you like so much? The where everyone is going on and on about the ring?"

"The Lord of the Rings?"

"Yes, that's the one. She is the eye-thing... except real."

He snorted, and she just stared.

His eyes widened. "Wait... you can't be-"

*~ Jewel eyed Judy please come home ~*

His Scroll sang out, and he sighed with relief.

"It's Em."

She gave him a look. "Is it now?"

"Don't even-"

*~ Jewel eyed Judy don't leave me alone ~*

She raised an eyebrow.

"There's not a lot of songs that fit." He grumbled, answering the phone. "Em, are you guys ok!?"

She listened as a familiar voice chatted animatedly out of the speaker.

"Yeah, we're good too. Listen, we've got to stop the attack, are you guys in? It's ok if you're no-"

He winced as the phone exploded in shouting, pulling it away from his ear.

"Ok, ok! I get it! We'll meet you outside of Bane's, see you in a minute." He sighed as he ended the call, smiling at her. "See?"

She shook her head. "They're fools."

"I think you're mispronouncing, 'the best.'" He corrected.

She smiled. "I suppose I am."

*~ I see your red door, I want it painted black. No colors anymore, I want them to turn black ~*

He perked up. "It's-"

"Adam." She finished for him. "Yes, we both agree that one is perfect."

He smirked as he answered. "Addie! Thanks for calling me back!"

She listened as a clipped voice spoke into her husband's ear, causing him to wince.

"Look, Addie, I'm sorry. I know we're kinda giving you mixed messages here, but I need to talk to you."

The answer was short and firm, just like she knew it would be.

Jaune sighed. "... Not even for a brother of the revolution?"

There was a long silence, followed by another short, somewhat hesitant, response.

"Yes!" Her husband cried, pumping his arm in the air. "Thanks, Addie!"

Her eyes widened. There was no way...

"Yeah, five minutes, I promise. You won't regret it, man. May the fires of the revolution burn forever in your heart too, buddy." He finished

cheerily, hanging up with a grin. "We're in!"

She shook her head. "Jaune, how are you even friends with that man? That is Adam Taurus..."

"Yeah, Addie's a sweetheart." He agreed.

"... the most wanted terrorist in Remnant."

"... Addie's *mostly* a sweetheart."

She sighed. "I suppose it would be hypocritical of me to complain about your taste."

He shrugged. "It's a valid complaint at this point. I mean, next I'm going to find out Bane runs drugs or something ridiculous like that."

"Yes... wouldn't that be something?" She said slowly.

He groaned. "Oh Gods, really?"

"In fairness to him, that puts him on the lower end of the scale." She comforted.

"Is there anyone I know that-"

His Scroll pinged, cutting him short. He looked down at it and nodded.

"Neo's ready for us. Still can't believe she can teleport, that's so cool." He looked up at her. "Are you going to be ok?"

"Of course." She promised.

"Cindy, we need her help." He warned.

"I'm calm, Jaune." She assured him.



"Ok..." he nodded slowly and sent a quick message. A moment later, the small girl popped into existence, causing him to hop back with a yelp. She looked between the two appraisingly, and apparently liking what she found, started clapping her hands together excitedly, a wide grin on her face.

"Smug little bitch!" Cinder roared, as flames exploded into her hands, making the smaller girl dart behind Jaune.

"Cinder, you promised!" He shouted, watching her carefully as the fire died down, and she slowly brought her breathing under control.

"I'm fine, I'm calm." She said in a clipped tone, still glaring at the girl peeking out from behind him.

He sighed. "Gods, do you do the... fire thing, all the time?"

Neo nodded emphatically as she gripped his side, eliciting a growl from the taller woman. He looked down at the girl and shook his head.

"Sorry, it's been a long day. Maybe tone it down a bit though?"

She gave an exasperated sigh and stepped away from him, though not far enough to give his wife a clear target. She looked up at him and started signing excitedly.

He nodded. "We're... working through it. Thanks, by the way."

She smiled and bobbed her head up and down.

"We kinda need a favor though." He explained. "Can you do the... teleport thing and take us to our friends? I don't think the car's a great idea at the moment." He cocked his head to the side. "Is it teleporting?"

She shrugged, and began tapping a finger on her chin, before perking up and signing at him again.

He nodded. "Sure, that sounds fair, whatever you want."

"What did she say?" Cinder snapped.

He sighed. "She wants a favor in return."

"The fucking gall-"

"Cinder," he cut her off, "it's ok, it can't be that bad."

The multicolored girl grinned at that.

"Besides, we're out of options, we *need* this. Pack in the anger for a minute, it's not *her* fault."

The dark-haired woman scoffed. "Fine."

He ran a hand through his hair and looked back to Neo. "It's Bane's place, you know it?"

She gave him a thumbs up.

"Great, just give me a second." He said, walking over to the wall, where Crocea Mors hung on its place above his chair. He gently, reverently, lifted the weapon off its rack, pulling the gleaming blade part way out of its sheath to inspect it for a moment, before slamming it home again, nodding to himself and tying it to his waist. He looked back to Neo, "ok, how do we do the-" was as far as he got, before he was staring at the bright neon of Bane's restaurant instead of his living room. "Whoa," he said, stunned.

Neo tittered silently at the inadvertent praise, making a theatrical bow that earned an eye roll from Cinder, before she shifted her gaze back to the darkened street, scanning both ways, and feeling her pulse start to rise when she saw no one waiting on them.

"Jaune..." She started, shifting nervously.

"They'll be here, they promised." He comforted.

"That doesn't mean the same thing to everyone else as it does to you, my love."

"Cindy..." his hand found hers, giving it a small squeeze, "they promised."

"Yeah, whose husband would Em try to move in on if we double crossed you guys?" A voice called from the dark.

"Fuck you, Merc."

"Hey, don't bring me into your weird fantasies."

Cinder tensed as the two tired, but familiar, figures stepped out of the darkness, while Jaune's face split into a grin.

"Hey guys."

"Hi, Jaune."

"What's up, bro?"

He shook his head. "You two are some real assholes, you know that?"

Mercury shuffled his feet nervously, "look man, it's not that we wanted-"

He cut the silver-haired man off, as he grabbed him and Emerald, pulling them into a warm embrace. "Thanks for coming." He whispered.

Mercury smiled as he patted his friend's back. "Wouldn't miss it."

"Yeah," Emerald said, squeezing his shoulder. "What are friends for? Now, what exactly are we all dying for again?"

He laughed as he pulled away. "You two would know better than me."

Emerald opened her mouth to respond, but Neo hopped into the space between them, angrily pointing and signing at the two.

"Neo! It's ok!" Jaune comforted, placing a hand on the small girl's shoulder. "There's no need for that kind of language."

"What'd she say?" Merc asked.

"You don't want to know." Jaune assured him.

"Was it about my dad? Cause if so, fire away."

"I think we're getting off track." Emerald groaned, looking over to Cinder. "What's going on? What happened?"

"Watts found out about Jaune and the baby. He's been blackmailing me for the past week, making me his personal hitman in exchange for keeping our secret." The dark-haired woman provided with a sneer.

"Gods, what an asshole."

"Yes," she agreed. "And while not ideal, the situation was under control-"

Neo snorted at that, earning another glare from the woman.

"-until a certain someone decided to murder the man following Jaune."

Mercury shot the small girl a thumbs up, while Emerald just shook her head.

"Wait, how'd he find out in the first place?"

Neo gave Cinder a knowing look, which the taller woman carefully ignored.

"Could have been anything, we'll never know for sure." She lied.

Mercury shrugged. "Ok, but what do we do about it now? I mean, we're pretty much finished with the preparations for the Fang to start moving forward with the attack."

"We need to get to Adam." Jaune said. "If we can convince him to call off the attack on Beacon, then there's hope we can stop the whole thing."

Mercury blinked at the blond. "Oh... so, we're all going to die then, that's cool too."

Jaune scoffed. "Addie's not that bad."

"Yes, he is." Three voices and someone signing chorused.

He rolled his eyes. "Well, if you all have any other suggestions..."

"Run."

"Running is good."

"Best plan I've heard all night."

"... that don't involve running away from our problems, then I'm all ears." He finished with a flat look.

Mercury ran a hand through his hair. "I feel like you kinda painted us into a corner with that last bit. That's really our thing."

"That is painfully accurate." Emerald agreed.

Cinder scoffed. "I don't know if I'd put it that way-"

Jaune sighed. "Cindy, how long have you been avoiding telling me about yourself?"

"-But I concede your point. This is the plan, suicide pact though it may be. Are you in or out?"

The two shrugged, and Emerald spoke up. "Sure, let's go talk to Adam, it went so well the last time."

Jaune's eyes narrowed. "What happened last time?"

"Ask her." Em offered, gesturing to Cinder, who winced.

She coughed. "I may have threatened his loved ones."

"Oh goddammit, Cinder."

"He was talking about you!" She defended.

"In a bad way?" He asked.

"... he was talking about you." She mumbled.

He ran a hand down his face. "Cool, anyone else have any good news they want to share before we go try to talk Addie off a ledge? Merc, did you shoot his dog by any chance?"

"Nope, I think you're up to speed, bro."

"Super." The blond drawled.

"How are we getting there?" Emerald cut in. "Watts will have people out on the streets by now."

"That, I have an answer for." Jaune stated proudly, stepping back and motioning to Neo. "Neo makes for a great ride."

Then green-haired girl snorted, and Mercury grinned.

"I'm sure, but how are we going to get there?" He teased.

"You're hilarious, truly." Cinder deadpanned. "The imp has agreed to help us."

"Sounds like she did more than-"

"It has been a long day, Mercury, do you really want to push this?" She warned.

He straightened at that, fighting to keep the smile off his face. "I'm good."

"Are you?" Jaune asked with a small smile.

"Good is a relative term." Emerald assured him.

He shook his head. "You guys ready for this?"

"No..." Emerald started.

"... But fuck it." Mercury finished.

The blond nodded, took his wife's hand in his, and linked the other with Neo. The other two moved in and join the circle, and they all blinked out of existence together.

---

When they appeared again, it was in front of a large, grey steel building with tall rolling doors and small, high glass windows in Vale's dock district.

"Holy shit." Mercury articulated.

"I know, right?" Jaune agreed.

Emerald rolled her eyes. "It's not that cool."

"I agree." Cinder added.

"Em, your Semblance envy is showing. Though, I guess green is your color."

Neo snickered at that.

"You are a riot. Have you considered stand-up? You might do alright, you know, if you can get your feet underneath you." She slapped in head in mock realization. "Oh, wait.."

Neo clutched her sides in silent laughter, as Jaune looked between the two in confusion, before looking to his wife for help. She just shook her head.

"Best not to ask, my love. They were broken when I got them."

He shrugged. "Well, no time like the present I guess. Do you guys have like, a secret password or..."

"No, but then, I've never shown up in middle of the night demanding a meeting, so who knows."

He sighed and motioned towards an open roll-up bay door. "Let's go say 'hi' then."

The sight of five humans walking into a White Fang base of operations without any formal announcement went over about as well as could be expected. Almost as soon as they cleared the tall door, the air was filled with the sound of gasps, wooden crates being dropped on concrete, and rounds being chambered, as dozens of Grimm masked faces locked in on them. Jaune resolved to defuse the situation as best he could.

"Hi, we're looking for Addie." He announced to the room with a wave. "Has anyone seen him?" When he was met with silence, he decided a description might help. "Red hair, kinda broody, real fond of the color black. Almost like a daytime tv vampire, really."

"That's a perfect fucking description." Someone mumbled from the crowd.

"Who wants to know?" A voice called, as giant of a man, Grimm mask in place and hefting a massive chainsaw, pushed his way through the crowd towards them.



The blond straightened. "Oh, sorry about that. I'm Jaune, it's nice to-"

"Well, 'Jaune,' I think you made a mistake coming here. A grave one." The man spat. "No human and his assorted whor-"

"Listen." Jaune cut him off. "I'll admit I'm super new at this, but I think it'd probably be for the best if you stopped there."

"Jaune, don't be rude." Cinder chastised him, fire in her eyes and ice in her voice. "Let this gentlemen finish his thought. We're all entitled to last words."

Neo nodded cheerily in agreement beside her.

"I would prefer it if you did not kill my lieutenant, thank you." A voice called from the back of the room, causing a sea of heads to turn, and Jaune to let out a breath of relief.

"Addie." He said with a smile, as the man made his way through the crowd to them.

"Hello, Jaune." The dark man greeted. "And for the record, I still think black is cool."

"I know you do, buddy," he laughed. "How you doing?"

"Stressed." He admitted. "It has been a trying couple of weeks."

"Lady troubles?" The blond asked sympathetically.

The faunus hummed. "No, actually. Your councilor friend, while... unorthodox, was helpful."

"Yeah, Bane's a good dude... well, I think so, it's honestly pretty hazy at this point."

Adam nodded, flicking a glance over to Cinder and her sleek, black catsuit.

"Ah, I see that your woman's... proclivities lean in the same direction that Blake's do. Tell me, how do you deal with the soreness?"

Jaune stared at him in confusion. "Wait, what? Addie, what are you talking about? Why are you... oh!" The blond said as he glanced back at his wife, and the lightbulb went off. He coughed and blushed. "That's not really our thing. Not that there's anything wrong with that!" He quickly added.

"Oh."

"I do like the catsuit, though." He scowled. "Wait, is that offensive? Cause it's not like a faunus fetish or anything, it's just cause..." He trailed off.

The two men stared at each other in silence for a moment, before Adam broke it.

"I would very much like if we could start this conversation again."

"Sold." The blond agreed gratefully.

"What was it that you wanted to talk about, Jaune?"

"Addie, it's about the attack, it's got to stop." Jaune pleaded, motioning towards the room full of armed men and women. "All of this has got to stop."

The dark man sighed. "I can understand why you might feel that way, Jaune, but no. If there is a lesson that has been hammered home for me, it is that there is only one way to make people understand your pain, and that's by sharing it with them." His gaze flicked over to Cinder. "Your wife understands that very well."

"She was scared, Addie."

"Aren't we all?"

"Addie, she's pregnant."

The man balked. "I... congratulations."

Jaune smiled. "Thanks, man. Yeah, I know Cindy went off the rails, but it was because someone threatened our family, so she did what she thought she had to." He shook his head. "And look where that's gotten us, she's doing something she doesn't want to, and you're about to do the same."

The faunus hummed. "Jaune, just because I don't want to do it, doesn't mean that it's not what's right for my people. This is our chance to do something that matters, and yes, it is truly heinous, but it'll make people afraid. Perhaps, in their fear, they'll be a little more hesitant to step on us while building their 'better tomorrow.'"

"Does Blake believe that?" He shot back.

The dark man looked at him appraisingly for a moment. "... She will, in time. Her safety will be guaranteed, that's what matters for now. I will deal with the fallout of my actions on my own terms." Again, he looked back to the dark-haired woman. "As must we all."

Jaune shook his head. "Addie, you know that's not how people work."

The red-head scoffed. "Fear is what drives men, it always has been, and always will be."

"But it doesn't have to be!" Jaune half-shouted, causing shifting in the ranks of the Fang, which Adam stilled with a hand, allowing him to continue. "I'm scared, you're scared, Cindy's scared! We're all fucking terrified, Addie, and I don't see anybody about to put down their arms." He shook his head again. "I can't begin to imagine what you went through to get here, but I bet it was excruciating. I know that it's got to eat at you, the thought that someone might get away with it, that they could hurt you like that and walk away unscathed."

The dark man before him refused to meet his eyes, as his wife and friends shifted uncomfortably behind him.

"But if you go through with this, setting aside the fact that that makes you just like them, think about what happens next. Hundreds, if not thousands, are going to die, and somewhere in those burning ruins, in those ashes, there's going to be a child that's just lost everything. Do you think that he's going to be thinking about a peaceful future because he's scared, or do think there's going to be something darker in his heart? Who do you think that boy grows up to be, Addie? Cause I think I'm looking at him."

"And what would you have me do!?" His friend snapped. "Nothing? Let the sins of the past go unaccounted for?"

"Of course not." Jaune answered calmly. "I'm just asking that just this once, just for today, we decide not to be afraid, to not let fear decide for us. Not to lash out because it feels right. We know how that story ends, and I think we're all tired of it. Let's write a new ending to this one, together." Jaune gave his friend a weak smile. "I need you to trust me, Addie. To believe in me, like I believe in you."

"... Jaune." He started.

The sound of loud applause filled the large, deathly silent room, and all heads whipped around to find the source. Watts stood in the middle of the entrance of the large, roll up door, grinning from ear to ear, a couple of dozen hard faced men and women in battered, white armor standing behind him, their various weapons raised, with the two closest to the man pointing directly at Jaune.

"Oh bravo, sir!" He laughed and whistled. "Encore! Encore! Please, don't stop your little speech on my account."

"Watts." Cinder growled. "I see you found us."

He scoffed. "Please, as if it was some great feat of detective work. You were always either going to run, in which case we'd hunt you down like a dog, or you were going to try to spit in my eye one last time." He shrugged. "I will say, I expected you to be a bit smarter than this. If you had just done as I'd instructed, you could have at

least had a few more months before I leaked your little secret to our Queen."

Jaune took a step towards the man. "You're the one who threatened my wife and child?"

"And they said you were dense. To answer your question, yes, I am the one and only Arthur Watts." The man took a theatrical bow. "But please, we're all friends here, call me Arty."

"That 'being the bigger man,' speech doesn't apply to you." The blond said coldly. "You're fair game."

"Hoho! The puppy has teeth!" The older man shook his head. "Not that it'll matter though. Your friend, 'Addie,' knows what's best for his people. He knows what's going to happen if they don't take action now. The same thing that's been happening in Atlas for decades. Isn't that right, Addie?"

Jaune turned back to look at his friend, and the faunus looked away, refusing to meet his gaze.

Watts cackled. "There's a smart lad. Oh, I forgot to introduce you to my friends!" He said, motioning to the crowd of soldiers behind him. "These are some of my comrades from Atlas that defected with me when the council didn't approve of our 'unethical practices.' They're all ex-Specialists, Aura unlocked and veterans of some of Atlas' less talked about conflicts, that agreed to help me come deal with you all. Awful considerate of them in my opinion."

"You bastard." Cinder snarled. "I'll-"

He tsked. "You'll do nothing. You're outnumbered and outgunned, 'Cindy.' But, if you cooperate, and come with me quietly, I may be persuaded to leave your prince charming alive."

"She's not going anywhere." Jaune shot back.

Watts turned to the man on his left. "If that one speaks again, be a chum and put one through his heart."

"No!" Cinder shrieked, glancing nervously between the two men. "I'll do it. I'll go back with you."

Watts smiled wide. "There, now you're using your head. Well, let's-"

"Wait." Adam said, drawing all eyes to him. "I'd speak to Cinder Fall one last time, before she disappears into your black bag."

Watts considered the faunus for a moment, before shrugging. "As you will, 'partner.' Just make it quick, I don't have all night."

Adam nodded. "Thank you." He said, reaching up and pulling off his mask as he made his way over to her. "I feel the need to look into your eyes when I say this." He explained, as he came to a stop in front of her, his emerald eyes boring into her amber ones. "Not long ago, you held me at your mercy, much like I do you now. Do you remember?"

She remained silent as she stared daggers at him.

"Do you remember?" He asked again.

"Yes." She hissed.

"I remember you asked me a question. Maybe you don't remember, but I do. You asked me about love. What was it you said?"

"... That is was paradoxical."

He nodded. "Yes, you told me that love is strange, because it both sets you free, and yet makes you a slave. I thought about those words long and hard, Cinder Fall. I thought about them, because you threatened the life of the one that I love when you said them."

Watts snorted. "Always making friends, aren't we?"

Adam ignored him. "I thought about them, but I decided that you were mistaken. You see, you kept telling me that love had made me a slave, just like you, but I have been a slave, or near to one. I have seen it my entire life, called by gentler names, and this does not feel like slavery to me. So, here is my question. Do you know why it doesn't feel that way, Cinder Arc?" Her eyes widened as he leaned in close, practically whispering in her ear. "It doesn't feel like slavery because you get what you want."

He rounded in a blur, his blade a flash as he drew it, sending a beam of red energy into one of the men aiming at Jaune, cleaving him in two, as Cinder's obsidian knife buried itself in the throat of his companion. Watts' eyes widened in shock as the blood splattered onto his face.

"Kill them! Kill them all!" Watts shouted, and the room became a whirlwind of violence. White Fang rifles spoke, spitting fire down into the ranks of Watts' men, the ex-Specialist returned fire with equal vigor, tearing faunus from their places atop shipping crates and behind loading equipment. Emerald and Mercury formed a protective circle before Jaune, as Neo, Adam, and Cinder leapt forward into the melee. Watts grabbed his lieutenant by the collar and pulled him close, yelling above the gunfire.

"Keep Cinder pinned down, I'll grab the boy." He growled, throwing the man away as he pulled his own weapons out. His trench spikes, two sets of brass knuckles with a long, wicked looking blades extending out from beneath. He grinned as he started to make his way towards boy, it had been such a long time since he'd gotten to get his hands dirty. The first Fang member that got in his way met a predictable end, a quick slice of the blade across his throat. He resolved to make the second one a bit more interesting, and broke his orbital bone with a quick hook, before snapping his neck. Sadly, it almost seemed like it was going to be TOO easy; he was already halfway to the boy before the silver-haired brat appeared before him, gently bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Come now, boy. Be a good little survivor and join the winning team."  
He offered.

Mercury tsked. "Yeah, not a big fan of being called 'boy.'"

"Perhaps you prefer, 'dead man?'" He growled back.

The mercenary smiled. "Yeah, that's more like it. Oh, and just so you know..." his smile grew into a grin. "You're gonna get Merc'd."

The silver-haired man tore off from the ground, sending a blast from his leg directly at the older man's face, before delivering a punishing kick to his liver as he raised his hands to block. Watts grunted as he hunched over, swiping a blade at the kickboxer's face that he leaned back to avoid, while kicking out the scientist's knee, stumbling him. Watts growled as he threw a quick combination of punches at the boy that he danced back to avoid.

"You're slow, old man." Mercury taunted.

"Keep talking, boy. I've been killing since before you were born."  
Watts spat. "I'll teach you how we fight in the old country."

"Bring it on, old timer."

Watts roared as he charged, firing a crisp combination of punches that Mercury caught on his arms, before driving a knee into the older man's stomach. Watts bent double, waiting for Mercury to move in again, before whipping his head up, driving his skull into the silver-haired man's nose. The mercenary cursed as he stumbled back, barely avoiding the slash meant for his throat.

"Not so cocky now, are we, brat?"

Mercury wiped the blood from his face with the back of his hand.  
"You hit like my old man." He spat on the ground. "My old man hit like a bitch."

"Like father, like son, then."



The two men snarled as they leapt in again, a blur of kicks and blades as each tried to find an edge. Mercury's speed and athleticism met with Watts' craft and years of battle-hardened brutality, dancing and cutting around each other as blood began to flow from a dozen wounds. Watts pressed forward, trying to corner and limit the young fighter, as Mercury carefully circled, keeping his angles of escape open as he picked at the man with sharp kicks.

"Slowing down, you fucking geezer?"

Watts grunted as shot out a jab, and the younger man dipped out of the way, snatching the older man's wrist as he went. He jerked Watts off balance, pulling the man towards him as he fired a round from his leg, pistoning his knee up into the older man's chin, which slammed closed with a crack as he tumbled backwards onto the ground in a heap.

Mercury took in deep breaths as he looked down on the man. "It's over. Call off the goons, and I'll make it quick." He promised.

Watts attempted to laugh, before turning his head and spitting blood and a few teeth onto the ground.

"Well, you're right about that, boy. The only part you got wrong, is where you think you've won."

Mercury tsked. "You're delusional."

"Undoubtedly, but do you know how I became Atlas' top scientist?" He smiled up at the boy, his mouth a mess of blood. "My Semblance, technomancy."

The boy stared at him blankly. "You're good at house music?"

"What? No! I control machines, you imbecile!"

"Oh." He said, before his eyes widened. "Oh!"

Watts laughed. "My apologies to the engineer..." He said, as the chambers in Mercury's legs first jammed, and then attempted to fire, blowing them apart at the shins, and sending the youth to the ground with a blood curdling scream. "... It was an elegant design," Watts finished as he found his feet, making his way toward the mercenary with his knife at the ready. "You were fast, boy, I'll give you that. Took me longer than it should have to realize those legs weren't real." He continued, as Mercury rolled on the ground, clutching at his legs. "But now you're finished." He raised his blade in the air, grinning as he prepared to bring it down on the defenseless man, and-

*Crack.*

His head whipped around as something slammed home, sending him stumbling away from the mercenary. When he shook his head to clear it, and looked back towards the scene, he saw a blond-haired man standing over Mercury, his simple blade drawn and shield at the ready.

"Get away from my friend." Jaune Arc growled.

Watts stared at the boy in disbelief, before exploding into laughter.

"You? Fight me? Oh, today just keeps on giving." He chuckled, before waving the knight on. "Come on then, boy, let's see how your missus fairs when she's listening to your screams." He taunted.

The blond knight shot forth with a yell, sword already in full swing. Watts tsked, such a clumsy assault. His hand shot out, brass knuckled ready to crush the boy's nose... and passed straight through the blond's head.

"What the-"

The man cried out as he felt the boy's blade slam into him again, knocking him back. He growled and slashed out as the knight's eyes, watching in confusion as the boy faded and appeared again, a foot

to left, bashing his shield into his face, sending him reeling once again.

*Dammit, but how!?* Watts thought desperately, watching the boy carefully as he circled. His eyes widened as he caught sight of the scene beyond the boy. There stood Cinder's green-haired apprentice, a dead Specialist at her feet and her sickle blades locked with another, staring at them intently. No, not them, at *him*. His distraction almost cost him, as the blond's blade slashed past his head again, seemingly appearing out of nowhere.

*So, that's it then.*

Now he just had to find a way to use the knowledge. His eyes traveled to the shuddering form of the silver-haired mercenary, and there it was. He slashed half-heartedly at the boy, forcing him to draw back as he leapt around him, half diving at Mercury's prone form. He extended his blades and waited...

The wet noise the blades made as they dug into the young knight's chest as he dove between him and his friend were every bit as satisfying as he imagined it would be. The boy stared dumbly down at the inches of cold steel buried into his chest, as if not believing what he was seeing. He vaguely heard the green-haired girl scream in the background, as he leaned forward and whispered to the boy.

"Do you feel like a hero now?"

He had expected the boy to crumble, to weep, to break. What he had not expected, was the feeling of teeth sinking into and tearing at his ear. He roared as he pulled back, wrenching his blades free, and dropping the knight, and a bit of his ear, to the floor.

"You wretch!" He seethed, holding a hand to the side of his head. "I will make you suffer!" He promised, surging forward to finish the boy, blade raised high. His advance was halted when he met with a long, slender blade pointed at his throat, leading down to a pair of hard, mismatched eyes. Neo's bloodstain visage, none of it hers, stared up

at him for a moment before sneering and popping out of existence, along with the two young men.

"No!" He growled in frustration, his prize gone. It was then that he heard a sound that chilled him to the bone.

"Jaune?"

His gaze snapped over to Cinder Fall, surrounded by three weary Specialist, several more already dead at her feet, her own gaze locked on another scene, Neo and Emerald hunched over the bleeding forms of Mercury and her husband.

"You fools!" He shouted. "Finish her, before-"

The sound that escaped Cinder Fall's lips in that moment, he could describe in a multitude of ways. Haunting, terrifying, heart-wrenching, if he were so inclined, but human... human was certainly not among them.

Her eyes erupted into flames, and the Specialists surrounding her literally melted away. He watched in horror and fascination as she rose into the air, flames encircling her as she raged, torrents of fire snaking out like elemental tendrils and consuming men and women as she pointed, oblivious to the rounds that melted away before reaching her. He had *never* felt anything like this before. He could see the air around her dance and shimmer from the heat, could see the steel beams melt away like wax when her flames touched them, could feel the very air in the room becoming scarce as she consumed it to fuel her insatiable bloodlust. She was a goddess of wrath, sweeping aside seasoned veterans with Aura like toys in her search. Her search for *him*, he thought, his heart seizing in his chest. He slowly moved backward, ducking behind a wall of crates, before quickly making his way towards the exit, and disappearing into the night. Some fools may have called it cowardice, and perhaps they were right, but he had learned long ago that cowards tended to live longer.

Across the room, a very different scene was playing out. Emerald desperately pressed her hands down on Jaune's open wounds, trying in vain to slow the bleeding, as Neo circled the three of them, her blade drawn and ready to defend them.

"Come on, Jaune! I need you to stay with me!" She shouted down at him.

"Is... is Merc..." He mumbled.

"Merc's fine! He's doing great, you saved him!" She comforted. "Now come on, you gotta stay awake!"

"... really tired..." He complained.

"Fuck that! You're going to be a father, Jaune! You remember!?"

"I-I'm a... dad?" He whispered, shaking his head some.

"Yes! Come on, stay awake!" She pleaded.

Adam grunted as he stumbled over to them, his left arm hanging limply by his side.

"We've got to get him up."

"Oh really!? I hadn't noticed, thanks asshole!" Emerald shrieked at him, tears streaking down her face.

He flinched back, before shaking his head. "You don't understand," he said, nodding towards Cinder, fresh tendrils of flames streaking off her and whipping around the room indiscriminately, the flames setting the building alight. "She's out of it, she'll kill us all if this goes on. She's got to snap out of it, she's got to see he's ok."

"Does he fucking look ok!?" She shouted, before whispering back to Jaune. "You're ok honey, you're gonna be fine."

"Move." He commanded.

"Fuck you." She shot back.

"I can save him." He promised.

"How?" She demanded, unmoved.

"I'm going to unlock his Aura."

Her eyes widened. "The shock will kill him!"

He swallowed, looking at the blond's still bleeding wounds. "... then I'll have saved him some pain."

She stared at him for a long moment, before slowly shifting back. "You screw this up, and you won't have to worry about Cinder." She promised.

He nodded and moved into position, placing his hand on the blond's forehead. "Jaune, if you can hear me, this is going to hurt, flow with the pain, not against it." He instructed.

"... ungh..."

He closed his eyes and reached out for the life that was Jaune Arc, starting the chant his master had taught him as he laid dying in a back alley a lifetime ago.

*"For it is through strength that we achieve immortality. Through this, we become a symbol of power and glory to rise above all. Infinite in fury and ultimately bound by death, I release your soul, and pass my pride onto thee."*

He felt a surge of power explode outward from the knight, and he winced. That much power being released in such a fragile state... he moved his hand down to Jaune's neck searching for a pulse, and felt nothing. He bowed his head as he heard the girl gasp behind him and felt the heat of Cinder's flames grow closer. It was over.

And then, suddenly, miraculously, he heard a second gasp. He stared down in disbelief as he watched the blond's eyes pop open, looking around in a panic as a white glow covered his body. He snatched the knight's wrists before he could reach for his wounds, as they both watched in amazement as they slowly sealed shut.

"Jaune!" Emerald shouted, pushing him out of the way and wrapping her arms around the knight.

"Em... need... air!" He grunted.

She shot backwards. "I'm sorry! Oh Gods, Jaune, are you-"

"I think so." He said weakly, giving her a smile smile, before looking over to Adam. "Addie, I-"

"There is no need. How do you feel?"

The blond chuckled. "I feel like that was the edgiest shit I've ever heard. Where did you get that? A poisoned fortune cookie?"

The dark man smiled despite himself. "An old friend."

"Wish I could've met him."

"As do I, but we have more pressing concerns," he said, pointing up to the raging Maiden. "Namely, your wife killing us all."

"Who, Cindy? She's harmless." He joked.

"Jaune!" Emerald shouted.

"Ok, ok." He grumbled, propping himself up with Adam's help, and looking towards the sky. "Cindy!"

She ignored him, gouts of flame slamming into the walls of the warehouse and punching holes in them, causing the whole structure to shake and rattle.

"Baby!" He shouted again, watching as faunus dove from flimsy cover to flimsy cover as she consumed all in her path, the very air he was breathing becoming difficult to take in because of the heat, leaving him panting. He had to break through to her.

"Hey pretty lady, what's say we cut this date night short? I've got a couch you might like that we can break in!"

Cinder Fall's head whipped around, and the flames died in her hands in a instant.

"Jaune?" She whispered, slowly lowering to the ground.

"Last time I checked." He said with a smile.

She was on him in an instant, arms wrapped tightly around him, and tears of relief flowing freely down her face.

"I hated that goddamn couch." She whispered.

"I know you did, baby." He whispered back.

"Jaune, I was so-"

He silenced her with a finger to the lips. "You got scared, it's ok. We all get scared."

She pulled back, scanning over him. "Are you alright, my love?"

He smiled. "Thanks to Addie and Em... and Merc... and Neo... it was really a team effort." He decided on.

She scoffed. "You are hard to keep alive."

"You probably should have just gotten a goldfish or a puppy, easier to deal with."

"And deal with living through a dog movie? Not on your life."



Adam looked over to Emerald.

"When I tell this story, this part will be different."

"Probably for the best." She agreed, before looking over to the couple. "Uh, guys..."

"Merc!" Jaune shouted, as he drug himself over to mercenary. "Merc, can you hear me!?" He shouted, gently shaking his friend.

"Gods, bro, I'm legless, not earless." He complained, popping open one eye. "Did you bite Watts' ear off, by the way?"

"I mean... a little."

"Fucking metal."

Jaune laughed. "What about you? You've got metal legs!"

The silver-haired man winced. "Yeah, I don't usually like to-"

"It's the coolest thing I've ever seen."

The mercenary stared up at him for a moment, then blinked, a small smile finding its way to his face. "... thanks, bro. That means a lot, more than you know."

Adam sighed, looking around at the wreckage of his base of operations, his Fang operatives stumbling around in a shocked daze. "Not to bring down the mood, but since my fate is now tied with yours, what comes next?"

"Welcome to the team." Jaune said, as he smiled tiredly. "Well, first, Neo is going to take us all to the hospital..."

The multicolored girl cocked her head at him.

"... because she's amazing."

That earned him a grin and a nod.

"And what then?" Adam questioned.

"Then?" Jaune laughed. "I've got to talk to Bro-Roman." He ran a hand through his hair. "Then we're going to where this all started."

"I don't understand, my love." Cinder said.

He took her hand in his and smiled.

"We're going to Beacon. I've got a Headmaster to talk to."

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## **The Chase**

**The ship cuts through the water with a speed previously unknown to us, as the true mast stands firm and bright in the center of the vessel, carrying us on.**

**The Bear of Black and White and the Amorous Father dance along the ropes, unfurling the sails to their fullest, positioning them to catch the most wind possible.**

**We have a ship to catch, after all.**

**I stare through me spyglass, catching sight of the stern of 'Stress Relief' as it bounces up and down on the swells of the sea.**

**" Can you see it, sir?" I hear to boy ask from beside me.**

**" Aye, boy." I answer, handing him the glass. "See there? On the horizon." I instruct, as he places the instrument to his eye.**

**" I see her!" He cries excitedly, leaning over the rail of the ship.**

**" There's a smart lad."**

**" But, sir." He says, slowly lowering the glass. "Why do we give chase? Will there be a battle?"**

**I laughed. "I don't think so, lad."**

**He looks around the deck in confusion. "But, sir, the crew, they prepare for war." He points to two hard men. "Mr. Graves and the Fallen Paladin distribute arms as we speak!"**

**" Aye, I don't dispute it, lad. There maybe violence, but that is not why we chase."**

**" Then why, sir?" He motions towards the ship. "Why all of this?"**

**I laugh and tussle his hair. "Because it's fun, and because I'm a bit mad." I finish with a wink, before pointing back towards the 'Stress Relief.'**

**" Look at it, boy. Truly look at it. See its masterful design? How the beams are shaped just so? How the sails catch the wind almost perfectly? How strong the mast stands?"**

**He nods. "I do, sir."**

**" Coeur is a masterful shipwright, lad. I marvel at his designs, but..." I chuckled lightly. "... they also stir a fire inside me. Every time I see that ship cut through the waves, I think, 'I can do better, I WILL do better,' and so I start to build."**

**" Do you hate him then, sir?" The boy ask.**

**I scoff. "There is no anger between us, boy. He builds his fleet, and as I stare at his back, I decide that one day I'll show him mine, that is all. His ships inspire me to design my own, as I hope that mine one day will to the next shipwright."**

**The boy nods. "I think I understand, sir."**

I clap him on the shoulder. "That is good, lad, for we are in the home stretch now! Look at how Crooc feeds the crew, ensuring their strength for what might come. How Demy watches for our enemies upon the sea from his place on high. How Burk instructs the Captain, and how the Captain instructs us all. We will push on, boy, because we believe. Tell me lad, what do you believe?"

" Sir, I believe we're closing the distance." He whispers.

I grin as the stern of our sister ship grows ever closer.

" Lad, I do believe you're right."

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## Neo's Do Over

Roman Torchwick was a busy man, running a criminal empire demanded such. However, he'd only gotten to the top of the heap by making the time to address treats when they arose, and there was currently a threat that needed to be addressed immediately.

Neo had been quiet for over an hour.

Now, that might sound silly to some, but that's just because they didn't really know his partner. Neo *abhorred* silence, much to everyone else's dismay. The girl was constantly in search of distraction, which usually turned out to be bloody or expensive... for him at least. She was like a Beowulf with a serious case of ADD on most days, and yet, she'd been sitting at his desk for an hour, tongue sticking out of the side of her mouth, scribbling in her heart covered notebook. That couldn't be good. He slowly walked over to the desk, trying to get a peak at the notebook.

"What you working on, Hellion?"

She snatched the book to her chest in an instant, glaring at him suspiciously.

He sighed. "I can't help you if you don't tell me what it is."

She stirred a little at that, placing a finger to her lips and making a shushing motion.

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, I'll keep it a secret."

She signed at him.

He held up a hand. "I promise. Now, what is it?"

She grinned mischievously, and setting down the notebook, reached beneath the desk and pulled out two figurines. A bride and a groom wedding toppers.

His eyes widened. "Neo, where did you get those!?"

She looked down at the two figurines in confusion for a moment, before shrugging.

"Is there *cake* still on those?" He asked incredulously.

She licked the unknown substance off the bottom of one of the figures and nodded in confirmation.

"Neo, I-... how-" He ran a hand down his face. "Actually, no, I don't want to know the how or the where, let's just skip to why. Why do you have wedding figures?"

She dropped the two figures and passed the notebook to him, a far too pleased smile on her face. He winced as she started to read.

"'Blondie and Fire Bitch's Perfect Wedding?' Neo, who are-" His almost dropped the notebook in realization. "No way!"

She clapped excitedly in response.

"Neo, they're already married!"

She scoffed and signed at him.

"I know you weren't there!"

She nodded and signed again.

"No, that doesn't mean that it doesn't count!"

She huffed and started signing more quickly, at least half of it nonsense gang-signs.

"What? No, you can't *own* people!"

She rolled her eyes and mouthed, 'ok,' sarcastically.

He shook his head. "Gods, Neo, why do you even want to do this?"

She pointed excitedly at the paper in his hands, which he began to read with a sigh.

"Six ring fire circus at intermission?" He lowered the notebook and looked at her. "Neo, there's so much wrong with that sentence that I'm not sure where to start."

She sighed and motioned for him to continue.

"Piranha dunk tank... participants to be decided by lottery." He sighed. "Well, I'm sure that breaks about five different laws, but at least you're being fair, I suppose."

She cocked her head at him and pointed down. He looked to the paper again.

"Note to self, make sure to rig the lotto against Crop-Top and Stilts." He chuckled. "Ok, that sounds more like you."

She beamed proudly.

"But I think they like those two." He offered.

She huffed and mouthed, 'fine.'

"Milkshake and Vodka fountain." He hummed. "Ok, I'll give you that one."

She nodded in appreciation.

"Ursa riding competition? Neo, that's not even a thing."

She signed at him angrily.

He tsked. "No, I don't believe you. It's not real."

She rolled her eyes and pointed down again. He shook his head and skipped to the end of the *very* long list. His eyes widened when he got there.

"Neo, no." He said, firmly.

She nodded in defiance.

"One, hell no. Two, it's not your decision. Three, hell no."

She hopped up on the desk and stared him down.

"You're not having a, 'bouquet battle royal to the death,' especially when the prize is *me* ." He said, meeting her glare.

She didn't even bother with real signs this time, but he caught the gist.

"No, I'm not that old! I've got plenty of time!"

She tsked and started in again.

"I don't care that the winner will have strong genes! I'm not a pet, you can't breed me!"

She had a good laugh at that, mouthing, 'sure,' as she hopped off the table and made her way to the door, patting his arm as she passed.

"Neo? Neo, I'm serious!" He called after her. "Neo, don't you dare! I agree to nothing!"

Today was going to be a very long day, he decided.



# The End of the Beginning

Well Cr00cy, we're almost there. I can't thank everyone enough.

## Chapter 11

### The End of The Beginning

---

Cinder Fall was his wife.

Jaune Arc knew this.

He also knew that she had a somewhat... questionable history with law enforcement in general, and Hunters in particular. It's why she wasn't with him now, as the bullhead shuddered and shook as it continued its journey through the skys of Vale. Gods, but he hated flying. Luckily, Emerald had taught him that chewing on ginger dampened the nausea somewhat, otherwise he was fairly certain that he wouldn't have been able to hold it in. Wouldn't that be embarrassing?

He breathed a sigh of relief as the craft began its descent and leaned back in his seat as it settled on the white stone landing pad at his destination. Beacon Academy for Huntsman. His dream, once upon a time. As the ramp door of the bullhead slowly opened, he squinted against the harsh morning light, eager to at least lay eyes on the place he'd dreamed of for so long. He stepped out onto the ramp, letting his gaze travel over the flagstone path, the immaculately carved columns, the impossibly green grass. It was beautiful, it was everything that he ever imagined that it could be, it was-

"Hello!"

His gaze snapped down to the source of the voice, a beautiful girl with long, red hair and bright green eyes, wearing a black blouse and

checkered red skirt.

"Uh, hi?"

She cocked her head to the side. "You wouldn't happen to be Jaune Arc, would you?"

He smiled. "Yep, 'fraid so. Short, sweet, rolls off the tongue, ladies love it."

"I'm... sure?" She tried slowly.

He groaned as he ran a hand down his face. "I'm so sorry! It's been a *long* time since I did that." He sighed. "It's just... this is Beacon, the Beacon! It's so cool! I'm a little nervous." He confessed.

She laughed. "No, it's ok! I'm just not used to one liners. People don't work up the nerve very often."

He snorted. "Yeah, it's almost like you're intimidatingly attractive or something, miss..."

She gave him a small smile. "Pyrrha Nikos, but please, call me Pyrrha. I don't think that's the only reason, but it's nice to meet you. The Headmaster sent me to escort you to his office."

He chuckled. "Glynda too caught up with paperwork? Figures."

She shot him a confused look. "Glynda? Oh! You mean Ms. Goodwitch?"

"Yeah, she said she was a bit more strict at work, but I only half believed her." He looked around conspiratorially, before leaning in. "Just between us, she's a giant softie."

The girl laughed again. "I look forward to watching you tell her that." She shook her head with a smile. "Are you ready to head on?"

He shot her a thumbs up. "Sure thing, Pyr, lead the way!"

She raised an eyebrow. "Pyr?"

He tensed. "It's a thing I do, but if it bothers you, I can-"

"No!" She shouted out hurriedly, before coughing. "I mean, 'Pyr' is fine, I like it."

He let out a sigh of relief as he started to follow her towards the looming tower in the distance.

"Good, because it's been a whole thing before. Like, Addie? Not a fan of his at first."

"Well, consider me one." She assured him as they walked along the white, stone path, flanked by fields of green. "I'm not that fond of my other one."

"You've got multiple nicknames? Someone's popular." He joked, before stroking his chin. "Actually, I feel like I know you from somewhere..."

She sighed. "Yes, I am *the* -"

He snapped his fingers. "You've got some kind of makeup deal, right? Like, eye shadow or something. Something 'Smokey,' I can't remember the full name, but yeah, I've got a couple of friends that use it."

She blinked at him for a moment, before responding slowly. "Yes, that and only that. I'm famous for nothing else."

"Still, that's pretty cool. I don't have a makeup deal!"

"Do you want a makeup deal?"

"I mean..."

She snorted. "You're odd."

He smiled back. "I'll tell you what's odd, is how any boy ever graduates this place."

"What do you mean?"

"Pyr." He said, giving her a look, before gesturing to the bustling campus around them. "If you had told me that this was, 'Beacon Academy for supermodels in training,' I would have believed you. Seriously, everyone here is ridiculously attractive! I don't even go here and I feel inadequate, this would have been a nightmare for younger me."

"Well, I don't know if I'd say we're all that good-"

"Pyr, stop, you're beautiful." He said, before pointing over to two people laid out on the grass. "I mean, look at those two girls, the one with the orange hair and the one with the pink stripe in green."

She shot him a confused look, following his finger over to the two.

"Oh, you mean Ren and Nora? They're my teammates."

"Well, they're both super cute."

"Also, Ren is a guy."

"... my point stands."

She smirked. "Don't let Nora know you're interested, it's bad for your legs."

"Noted, but no promises."

She shook her head. "Anyway, what brings you to Beacon, if you don't mind me asking?"

He hummed. "I kind of made a deal with Ozpin, and it's time for me to fulfill my end of the bargain."

"You made a deal with Headmaster Ozpin?" She said in disbelief.  
"Are you some sort of businessman?"

He laughed. "No, don't think I'd be very good at it. My wife on the other hand? She's pretty cut-throat."

"Oh, you're married?" She asked.

He grinned. "Yeah, can you believe it? Still don't know what she saw in me."

"I think I can start to see it..."

"You're sweet." He said. "I think you two would get along, you both seem pretty put together. Cindy appreciates a woman who knows what she wants. I mean, she's a little testy with Neo, but that's a long story."

"Maybe I'll get to meet her sometime."

He smiled. "I'd like that. It might be awhile though, I don't know how long it'll be till we'll be back in town."

"Well, that's a shame." Pyrrha said softly, as they reached the elevator, reaching out and pressing the button.

He reached out and playfully shoved her. "Hey, don't be such a downer. Ask Glynda for my contact info and you can come visit us. If you're not too busy here, that is. I imagine you're pretty popular."

"I've got time!" She assured him. "Just let me know!"

He chuckled. "Sounds good to me! Feel free to bring your friends too, I've been trying to set Merc up with someone for ages. I'd ask for Em too, but Cindy always says she'll 'deal with her.'" He shrugged as they started their ascent. "How do you like it here anyway?"

"It's fine."

"That bad?"

She sighed. "No, it's not. Ren and Nora are great, the best teammates I could ask for, really. I wish I'd worked out where I had a partner, but honestly, there's nothing wrong with it. I just... wanted to get away from home, and this still feels a bit too much like that."

He nodded. "It gets better. I didn't know who I was or where I was going when they rejected me from this place, but life has a way of figuring itself out." He chuckled as he rubbed the back of his head. "Sorry if that sounds kinda corny."

"You got rejected from Beacon?" She asked in disbelief. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Wasn't ready for it, I guess."

"You could always re-apply." She offered.

"Yeah, I thought about it, but I don't think that's where I'm needed." He squeezed her shoulder. "Give these people a chance though, they might surprise you." He grinned. "And if they don't? I'll tell Glynda to sort'em out."

She laughed as the elevator reached their floor, and the doors slowly began to open.

"Well, I appreciate the offer, but I'm not sure you could convince her to-"

"Jaune Arc!" A voice roared from outside the elevator, as a very perturbed looking deputy Headmistress made her way over to them.

"Notorious G!" The young man called with a grin.

"Don't you dare, G-anything me, Jaune! Do you know how worried I've been!?"

"Glynda, we were fine! I called!" He defended.

"You called after the hospital did!"

"Huh, guess you're still listed as my emergency contact." He mused.

"You think!? Jaune, how did you even-"

Pyrrha coughed nervously from her place in the elevator, drawing both sets of eyes in the room to her.

"Um, do you still need me, or..."

Glynda sighed as she lifted her glasses up rubbed her eyes. "No, Ms. Nikos, you are free to go. Thank you."

"Bye, Pyr!" Jaune called happily, waving at her.

"Bye, Jaune!" She called back, returning his wave and mouthing, 'good luck.'

He smiled, and mouthed 'big softie,' with a wink, as the doors closed on her.

"She seems nice." Jaune observed.

"Yes, Ms. Nikos is an exemplary student. In fact, she's-" She stopped herself and glared at him. "No sir, Jaune Arc, you won't derail me that easily."

He smiled sheepishly. "Hey, it almost worked."

She sighed again. "Jaune, the things you've been asking for over the past couple of weeks, the people you've been asking them for, what's going on?"

"It's been a weird couple of weeks." He admitted, running a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry for worrying you."

"I'm *still* worried, Jaune."

"I should have told you earlier, I didn't think."

"A habit of yours." She growled.

"Tell me about it."

"How much time do you have?" She deadpanned.

He chuckled. "Does this mean I don't get a hug?"

She rolled her eyes, before grabbing him by the wrist and pulling him into a tight embrace.

"I'm so glad you're ok." She whispered.

"I think I'm too oblivious to die." He joked.

"Let's not test that theory, ok?" She pleaded, stepping away from him.

"Yeah, sounds good to me, already did that once recently."

"I'm sorry, you what!?"

He laughed nervously, before looking to large, wooden door behind her. "Do you think he's ready? I don't want to be late."

Her gaze narrowed. "We're not done here, but yes, he is ready for you." She sighed. "Knock twice, then go in."

He squeezed her shoulder and smiled as he passed. "I'll be back in just a minute. Gotta tell you about the pregnancy, we're having twins."

"Twins!?" Was the last thing he heard as he reached out, and opened the door. The first thing that struck him as he stepped through was the sheer number of gears and clocks around the room. Everything either seemed to be shaped like, or actually was, a functioning gear, from the floor to the ceiling.



"Wow." He whispered.

"Mr. Arc, you were supposed to knock." His gaze traveled over to the well dressed, silver-haired man sitting behind his desk... also made of gears.

He hummed. "I forgot."

"I'm sure." Ozpin deadpanned, motioning for him to take a seat.

"Don't you think it's a bit much?" Jaune asked as he settled himself.

"Expecting people to knock?"

Jaune chuckled. "No, I mean, all of this." He motioned to the room around them. "That's a lot of clock imagery. I think the only way that you could be more obvious about the 'time has no real meaning to me' thing is if you had like, a magic phone booth or something."

"I'm not a time traveler, Mr. Arc."

"Yeah, I know."

"I see Mrs. Fall has been open with her secrets."

He smiled ruefully. "If it makes you feel better, that's a recent development. She does know a lot about you though."

Ozpin hummed as he leaned back in his seat. "Yes, and I'd like to know more about her little group as well, hence this meeting. Also, you're various 'favours,' everything from pardons, to tariffs, to air time on the CCT." He folded his hands in front of him. "That's quite a lot of effort on my part."

"It's quite a lot of risk on ours." Jaune countered.

"It doesn't have to be. I could offer you protection." He looked at the boy meaningfully over his glasses. "Particularly you, Mr. Arc."

Jaune nodded. "Thanks, but I'm happy with where I'm at."

"You understand what she is, don't you? She's-"

"My wife." Jaune finished for him. "And if you want this meeting to continue, that's what we'll refer to her as."

The Headmaster nodded slowly. "Very well, but I don't understand why you won't trust me."

Jaune shrugged. "We do, we just trust you to do what's right for you. I've gotten Cindy's side of the story on how it all went down between you and Salem, sounds like a lot more grey than black and white to me."

The older man scoffed. "Obviously, her view would be biased."

"Maybe, maybe not. Look, to be honest, shades of grey don't bother me as much as I thought they would. I think you're doing what you think is right."

"I've always-"

"I just don't think that puts my family's safety as high on your list of priorities as I'd like, so here we are." Jaune smiled. "No hard feelings, I'm just doing what's right by them."

Ozpin hummed. "Well, if I'm so interested in the ends justifying the means, what's to stop me from apprehending you right now?"

"Glynda." The blond answered calmly. "Also, you have no idea where the others are. I sold Cindy on not burning this place to the ground because our family was more important, but what do you think she'll if something were to happen to that family?"

"You are a shrewd negotiator, Mr. Arc."

The young man laughed. "Who knew, right? Life is weird like that." He smiled as he looked around the room. "I feel like I'm in a movie."

"And are you a hero or a villain in that movie?" Ozpin questioned.

Jaune sighed. "Probably a bit character. But, I will tell you what else I am, a husband and a father. So, I guess the answer to that question depends on where you stand in relation to them."

"Why trust me at all then?"

"We don't really have a lot of choice, you want what we have, and we're not going to get through this all on our own. Plus Glynda. If she trusts you, you've got to be ok at least."

"A ringing endorsement." The older man said with a smirk. "Very well Mr. Arc, I'll stop trying to recruit you. Just know that the offer stands."

"I appreciate it."

The silver-haired man shifted in his seat. "Well then, not to rush you, but..."

"Oh, right!" Jaune said, fishing around in his pocket until he came back up with a small flash drive.

Ozpin raised an eyebrow. "That's it?"

Jaune nodded. "Info on every agent, every safehouse, and every target that we know about."

The man reached out for the drive, and Jaune pulled it back. "I have two more requests."

"Really Mr. Arc, bribing Vale's council wasn't enough for you?"

"These are easy."

The older man sighed. "Very well, what are they?"

"Give Glynda an extra week of vacation and find Pyrrha Nikos a partner."

The Headmaster gave him a wry smile. "I have to give up Glynda? That's a hard bargain."

"I'm a cruel man." The blond joked.

"I will make it so, Mr. Arc. Now, the drive, if you please."

The young man smiled as he handed the device over. "This should keep you busy for awhile, and hopefully sets her back."

"I promise to do everything in my power." The older man said solemnly.

"I believe you." The blond said, meeting his gaze for a moment, before breaking out into a grin. "Whelp, I gotta get going, don't want to keep Cindy waiting! She gets antsy like you wouldn't believe." He said, finding his feet.

Ozpin shook his head. "You are strange man, Mr. Arc."

"So I've been told."

"Where will you go?"

Jaune laughed. "Kinda defeats the purpose if I tell you, doesn't it? Don't worry about it, we'll be watching. Just don't try to find us, when we're ready, we'll find you."

"That sounds vaguely threatening, Mr. Arc."

Jaune tsked as he walked over to the door. "Shit, I'll have to get help making it more clear next time."

Ozpin chuckled to himself as the blond opened the door. "Goodbye, Mr. Arc."

"See you around, Ozzy."

Jaune made it roughly a half step into the waiting room, before he found himself pinned against the wall with mystical energy.

"Hi, G," he choked out.

"Twins!? When? How?" She demanded.

He laughed. "Well, it could have been the time in the kitch-" He grunted as she dropped him to the floor.

"Smartass." She muttered. "When?"

He shook his head as he picked himself up. "Looks like about a month ago."

"Oh, Jaune, I'm so happy for you!" She gushed. "Do you have names picked out?"

He grinned. "Kinda, it's a pretty hotly debated in our little crew right now."

She huffed. "I should have known a month ago."

" / didn't know a month ago!"

"Well, I assume I'm in the running for godmother at least?"

He chuckled nervously.

"Jaune!"

"I'm sorry! I traded that away for a favor to an assassin!" He winced.

"Wow, that sounds awkward when I say it out loud."

Glynda groaned and buried her face in her hands.

"We *really* needed her help." He offered.

She sighed. "Fine, but I'm co-godmother."

"I don't think-" He stopped as she stared him down. "-that there's any problem with that!" He finished.

"Jaune, I *have* to meet her."

"You will, I promise."

"I better." She threatened playfully, before shaking her head. "What was it all for, Jaune? All these wild requests?"

He held up a finger and looked at his watch. "Let's see, it's 11:57. Watch Lisa Lavender when she comes on at 12:00, and you'll see."

She rolled her eyes. "Men of mystery are overrated."

He laughed. "Yeah, but I've got a ride to catch." He leaned forward and pulled her into a hug. "You know, you should visit Patch sometime soon, if you get some vacation time. I hear it's nice."

She squeezed him gently. "In the unlikely event that that occurs, I'll be sure to make that happen."

He smiled and pulled away, stepping towards the elevator. "I think you might find some free time in the near future."

She tsked. "You're having too much fun with this."

"Maybe." He admitted, stepping into the elevator. "Just remember to watch the news."

She gave him a small smile. "However will I remember for the next 60 seconds?"

"Never change, Notorious G."

"I'm going to find you, Jaune. Those babies will be spoiled."

He laughed as the doors closed. "I'm counting on it!"

The older woman sighed, and pulled out her Scroll, flipping it over to the appropriate feed. Her eyes widened in horror when she saw the image that greeted her.

---

"Lisa Lavender here, folks, and do we have a treat for you today? Two of the biggest movers and shakers in business have agreed to join us for a meeting today. Gentlemen, you please introduce yourselves?"

The camera panned over to a well dressed man in a white coat and bowler hat, seated in a purple chair. "Oh Lisa, you know me."

"I do Roman, but I'd prefer you introduce yourself to the audience."

He sighed, and made a theatrical bow. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I am Roman Torchwick, the Gentleman th-" he coughed, "gentleman."

"Grand," she deadpanned, "and our other guest is a new face to Vale..."

"Adam Taurus." The red-haired man announced as he shifted uncomfortably in his own seat on a purple couch, feeling naked without his mask.

"And this gentleman sitting with you is?"

A giant of a man in a white suit leaned into the shot and reached out a hand. "Big Daddy Bane, Lisa, always been a fan of yours."

She looked at him skeptically as she took his hand. "Charmed. Big Daddy Bane?"

"Nicknames are common in the industry." He explained.

"And what industry is that?"

The man drew himself up to his full height. "Why, I'm Mr. Taurus' spokesman and adviser." He announced proudly.

"Provisional adviser." Adam quickly corrected.

"See how careful he is with his decisions? Now that's a leader." Bane congratulated.

Lisa raised an eyebrow. "And Mr. Taurus needs a spokesman because?"

"He's a very passionate, but private person. You should be flattered, Lisa, this is a rare public appearance."

"Well Mr. Taurus, we are honored."

"That is the appropriate feeling, human."

"He means, 'we're happy to be here,' Lisa." Bane translated.

She sighed and muttered something about 'the crazies,' under her breath before continuing.

"Gentlemen, you've come together to form what people are calling the business deal of the century, opening up a tariff free trade route between Menagerie and one of the main kingd-

"Menagerie is a main kingdom." Adam cut in.

"He's a proud faunus." Bane explained.

"-Between Menagerie and a sister kingdom for the first time in history. What's more, you've both brought pools of manpower to the table seemingly out of nowhere, which has allowed you to get a jump on the competition. You've even unionized the faunus work force. It's truly a feat of legal and business maneuvering."

Roman preened. "Why, thank you, Lisa. It was an idea that came to me-"

"But what's also interesting is the dark rumors surrounding the deal."



"I'm sorry?"

"Roman, please, we all know your reputation, and your criminal history."

He tsked. " *Alleged* criminal history."

She scoffed. "Roman, we have a video. Bobby, play the video."

"I don't think that's neccesa-"

An image of a younger Roman Torchwick flickered to life on the screen behind them, leaning out of the side a bullhead, and firing towards trailing police vehicles while hooping and hollering.

" *You'll never take me alive, O'Connor! You and the rest of the VPD can suck my-*"

"I think that's enough, Bobby, thank you. Mr. Torchwick?"

He coughed. "While that handsome young gentleman might bear a passing resemblance to me, and have excellent fashion sense, I assure you that you'll find that I have no criminal record."

"Yes, which has left VPD baffled as to how you-"

"Besides, I have nothing but the utmost respect for Vale's finest. In fact, I just bought the house across from Commissioner O'Connor."

"Why would you do that?" She questioned.

"One, I want to feel safe at night, and two, it's *hilarious* ."

"What about all the allegations that getting this deal done required not only an incredible amount of top down pressure, which no one can explain, but also widespread bribery and extortion? All of it tied to your name?"

"Do you happen to have the names of the people spreading these heinous rumors? I'd love to pay them a visit... in court."

"I'm sure." She drawled.

"Anywho Lisa, you free tonig-"

She ignored him. "Mr. Taurus, with this new deal, you stand to become one of the wealthiest men in Remnant, and if you forgive me for saying so, with looks like that, you stand to become one of its most eligible bachelors."

"I'm taken!" He snapped out in a rush, fiddling with a band around his neck.

"Mr. Taurus, is that a collar?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"He doesn't want to talk about it." Bane echoed helpfully.

She sighed. "I'm assuming that you're referring to your rumored relationship with Ms. Belladonna, heir to the Belladonna household, then?"

Adam nodded, holding up a hand to silence Bane.

"Well, that does make you quite the mover and shaker then. Successful businessman and potentially in what is essentially the royal family."

The faunus shuddered. "There will be many trials before that point, I assure you."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"My client is just saying that he doesn't like to count his chicks before they hatch." Bane interpreted.

Adam glared at the man. "I'm a bull fau-"

"Your name isn't free of controversy either though, Mr. Taurus. Your description fits perfectly that of the terrorist leader that has been evading capture in both Atlas and Vale for years now. Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain any video of these incidents."

Adam hummed. "Sounds like a real professional, unlike that other guy-"

"Son of a-"

"-did he have a cool nickname?" He pressed.

"Translation error!" Bane blurted out. "My client is trying to say that he finds these acts cold and condemns them."

"I've always thought that Red Viper sounded appropriate, given-" He grunted as Bane slammed an elbow into his side, earning him a glare.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Taurus, but to be clear, were you or were you not in the White Fang?"

"My client doesn't-"

"I was."

"I see. You understand why that might scare off investors?"

He snorted. "Then let them be scared. I am not one of them, and that frightens them. I didn't come from a prestigious university, I have no understanding of economics or politics-"

"Uh, boss-"

"-But what I do understand is hunger and fear. It's why I joined the White Fang, to stop being afraid, to stop wondering where my next meal was coming from. It's why we all did. We were ready to stop

being stepped on, to get back at those who had made us weak, by whatever means necessary." He took a deep breath, and slowly let it out. "But then I met a strange man, an unlikely brother of the revolution, who taught me that perhaps, my anger was costing me more than those that had caused it. That perhaps, as hard as it was to swallow, the best revenge is living well. Well Lisa, I looked upon my people, and they were not living well, so I resolved to change that, regardless of what kind of company I was forced to work with." He finished with a glare at Roman.

"We find Torchwick industries to be trustworthy and viable partners." Bane explained.

Lisa nodded slowly. "That is a powerful and personal message, Mr. Taurus. Your friend sounds wise."

"Well, he also told me that strangers are just friends that you haven't met yet, which is patently untrue, so it's been mixed advice."

She snorted. "Did you just make a joke, Mr. Taurus?"

"It's possible." He admitted with a small smile.

She smiled. "Do you have anything else to say to the people of Remnant?"

He hummed. "Just one. Mr. Schnee, understand that our feud is far from over. I have simply learned a new form of warfare, one which I am bringing to bear shortly. That should frighten you, because I'll be coming to you on your home turf, the boardroom. Understand this, there will be no 'better future' for any of us, without all of us."

"Mr. Bane, anything to add?" Lisa asked.

He shrugged. "Fucking nailed it."

Adam nodded. "The fires of the revolution burn on."

Lisa balked. "I'm sorry, the revolution? Mr. Taurus, are you still involved in the Fang?"

The faunus opened his mouth to speak, but his large partner cut him off.

"The revolution is a clothing company that my client is starting! All black clothing, all the time! You know what they say, always be promoting!"

She shot a look towards Adam. "Mr. Taurus, is that true?"

The dark man shrugged. "Why not? I've always thought black is cool."

---

Jaune shook his head as he shut down his Scroll and stepped off the bullhead onto the busy docking area in downtown Vale.

"I know you do, buddy." He said softly.

He glanced around, trying to spot his friends, till he felt something press into his back, freezing him in place.

"Your money or your life, pal."

He sighed. "Listen, I'm not trying to tell you how to do your job, but this seems like a bad idea."

"Yeah, why's that? You some kinda Hunter or something?"

He laughed. "Not even close, but my friends? They get pretty ornery about this type of thing, and they're not the kind of people you want to upset."

The man hummed. "Sounds like a couple of badasses. Is one remarkably handsome, and the other like, probably a 6 on a good hair day?"

"Fuck you." A second voice called.

Jaune smirked as he turned around. "Hi, Merc. Hi, Em."

Mercury smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, bro, we got bored."

"Mercury got bored." Emerald corrected. "How'd it go?"

He shrugged. "I think about as good as we're going to get. You guys see the broadcast?"

She snorted. "Yeah, were they really our best options?"

"Hey, Addie did ok." He defended.

"Bro, he full up admitted to being a member of a terrorist organization. He just happened to stumble his way to success after that." Mercury observed.

"I've been told that's surprisingly effective."

"Yeah..." Emerald drawled. "Let's not make a habit of it. I enjoy living."

"No promises."

"I can't tell if my lifespan has gotten longer or shorter since meeting you." The silver-haired man complained.

Jaune chuckled. "Hey, at least your life is exciting now."

"It was exciting before this! Now it's just exciting with a high chance of Grimm overlords!" Merc groaned. "I mean, Em's got ulterior motives for being here, but-"

"Merc, you're never making it to Patch." The green-haired girl growled.

"-I guess this is cool too." He finished with a grin.

Jaune shook his head. "Well, glad to have you aboard." He ran a hand through his hair. "Now we just have to find something to do for a living once we get to Patch. What do you guys usually do?"

"Soldiers of Fortune."

"War Dogs."

"Mercenaries."

"Contractors."

"Aggressive negotiators."

"Peace keepers."

"Guns for hire."

"Militaires Sans Frontières."

"Hitm-"

"Ok, ok, I get it!" He groaned. "Do you guys know how to do anything non-violent?"

"I steal things." Em offered.

He ran a hand down his face. "Anything that's not illegal?"

"Really handcuffing us here, bro."

"You two are ridiculous." He complained.

Emerald held out a hand. "Hi, pot, I'm kettle."

He snorted. "Whatever, we'll wing it."

"Oh, so the normal plan then." Mercury teased.

"The normal plan." Jaune agreed.

"Why are we going to Patch anyway?" The mercenary asked.

Jaune sighed. "We've set what's-her-name back-

"Salem, it's totally Salem." Em provided.

"-But she'll be back, and these people are going to need help. I want to be close enough that when that time comes, we're here waiting, ready to do our part. Not for Ozpin, but for Bane, for Roman, for Neo, for all the people of Vale. When they need us, we'll be there."

They both stared at him for a moment.

"For free?" Mercury asked.

He shrugged. "I mean... what's the going rate? Is there even a rate?"

"Bro, I have a chart."

"It's very scientific." Emerald agreed.

He laughed. "Then we'll calculate it up when it all goes down. I'll be honest though, some of it might be pro bono."

Mercury sighed. "Yeah, yeah, we joined team bleeding hearts. Where's the boss lady anyway?"

Jaune smirked. "She's just taking care of a few loose ends here in Vale, she'll catch up in a bit."

"Ominous." Emerald teased.

"Don't you know? I'm a criminal mastermind." He shot back with a smile.

"Well, you're hanging with the right crowd." She agreed, as they made their way over to the docks to catch their boat. "We're all bad



guys now."

"Hey, it's all a matter of perspective."

---

Arthur Watts was screwed.

He knew this.

He had hidden information from his Queen in order to advance his personal agenda, putting their operations at risk. Worse, he had underestimated how violently Cinder Fall would react to the situation, a choice that had left all of their operations in Vale in shambles. Luckily, Cinder Fall was a vindictive woman. Well, luckily for him, not for the men he currently had stationed in the distribution center he was currently watching her wreck from the control room in his Vale safehouse.

"Just couldn't resist, could you, Cindy?" He growled, before keying the microphone on his control panel. "Matthews, rally the men we have here, the bitch is at location 4, go end her."

"Sir, that leaves this location-"

"Do not question me, not if you wish to remain among the living!" He roared.

"Y-yes, sir!" The soldier fumbled out, ending the communication immediately.

Watts scoffed. The fool didn't understand, all that mattered now was ending Cinder. If he could manage to kill her, he could still salvage the situation, pin it all on her and return to his Queen a hero. A bloodied hero, but a hero nonetheless. He watched with rapt attention as the dark-haired woman on his screen flipped from soldier to soldier, snapping necks and slitting throats with her dark blade, an acrobat of violence.

"Do your worst woman," he hissed, "so long as you stay where I can see you, I've already won. If burying you in numbers is what is required, then so be it."

He groaned as a particularly brave, or perhaps foolish, soldier charged her back, sword extended, before she whipped around in a blur, catching his wrist and pulling him to her, holding her blade to his throat as other soldiers surrounded her.

"Yes, yes!" He shouted. "Shoot her you fools! Shoot her!"

Then, something very peculiar happened. Cinder looked up toward the camera her was watching her through, and grinned. She blinked once, and amber eyes became brown and pink, before winking at him. Then, she blinked out of existence. Arthur Watts stared long and hard at the screen, trying to understand what he'd just witnessed, to piece it together in a way that made sense. So focused was he on this task, that he didn't notice the shadowy figure that dropped down from the ceiling behind him, her blades at the ready.

Cinder Fall was a monster.

But to Jaune, she was simply his wife....

And they'd kill to keep it that way.

---

## **Journey's End**

**The waves crash against our hull as the ship races forward, growing ever closer to our sister ship.**

**The Captain shouts out orders, and Bears of Black and White and Amorous Fathers jump to task, desperately trying to find ways to speed us on. Fallen Paladins and Mr. Graves travel from man to man, whispering encouragement and checking their weapons. Demy scours the surface of the seas with his looking glass, ensuring that none will interrupt us. Crooc and Burk**

stand together, discussing the best angle from which to come upon her.

To come upon the 'Stress Relief.'

My breath catches in my chest. This could be real and not real at the same time. Something that seemed impossible, and yet is happening.

" Sir... we approach." The boy whispers, echoing my thoughts.

" Aye, boy." I respond horsely. "That we do."

" I thought you were mad." He admits.

I chuckle. "This doesn't make me sane, lad, it just means that we're all crazy."

We watch together as the distance closes, 20 ship lengths becoming 10.

" I think that I'm ok with being crazy." He says softly.

" Aye, lad, me too."

" What will we do when we come alongside her?" He ask.

" Don't you mean if?"

" I mean when, sir."

I shake my head. "Cheeky brat." I take a moment to consider his words, watching as 10 lengths become 5. "I don't know, lad."

The boy balks. "But we've come so far, sir! How is it that you don't know?"

I shrug. "I'll know when I know, boy."

He sighs. "What do you know, sir?"

I hum. "That it's time to move to the rail, lad. We are upon her."

And so we are, and so we do. Our crew, swollen to numbers that I would have refused to believe, move to the rail, ready for whatever may come. Then, miraculously, incredibly, it happens. We pull alongside the 'Stress Relief.' I can see it all, every plank, every rope, every cannon gleaming in the light of the morning sun. Most importantly though, I can see them. They stand by their own rail, staring back across the waves at us.

The Well Educated Fool.

The Pokemon that has become super.

The Captain of the ship, Coeur himself.

Our eyes meet, and I my hand reaches down for my pistol, as he mirrors the motion. I feel the boy tense beside me, as I draw my weapon, and the crew all around me do the same, the crew of the 'Stress Relief' matching us in perfect harmony. We raise our weapons, and we fire...

Our guns roar as they discharge harmlessly into the sky, our salute to our sister ship, filling the air with smoke. But still, even through this haze, I can see him. We share a small nod as Burk calls to the Captain, and we shift course. Our course has never been theirs, and theirs has never been ours.

The boy lets out a sigh of relief. "What now, sir?"

I tussle the lad's hair. "Now, lad? Now it is time to stop in port."

---

Our journey to port is uneventful, and as our mighty and worn craft pulls up alongside the docks, and man that is familiar to me walks towards the ship, shouting up to the Captain.

**" Who is that man, sir?" The boy questions.**

**" Ah, that be Nyx, lad. He's the dock-master, here to archive our journey."**

**The boy shoots upright. "Archive? But sir, does that mean that our journey is over?"**

**I chuckle and clap the lad on the shoulder. "The journey is never over, my boy, but I think this is where you leave us."**

**" But sir, why!? Have I not been a good sailor?"**

**" Nay lad, you've been an excellent one." I comfort.**

**" Then why, sir?"**

**I smile gently. "Because you finally understand the nature of ships, boy. You need us no longer."**

**He swallows, shifting around the deck nervously. "What will you do, sir? Where will you go?"**

**I hum. "Me? Well, mayhaps I'll raid the fluff coast for an epilogue chapter or two, I've always figured a story should have a dozen chapters, maybe a baker's dozen for this one. Then, I'll park the ship, till one day the storm of sequels comes for us. Hell, maybe I'll even go plunder the Emerald isles for awhile, they are practically untouched."**

**" But, sir... what will I do?" He ask quietly.**

**I kneel down beside him, placing my hands on his shoulders.**

**" Why, lad... whatever makes you happy."**

**He stares into the boards of the deck, disappointed with my answer, and so I continue.**

**" But, I'll tell you what I hope you do." I say, smiling as his gaze shoots upwards. "I hope that you choose to go out and build a ship of your own, a mighty ship that puts everything that I have ever built to shame."**

**" Do you believe such a thing to be possible, sir?" He whispers.**

**I smile back at him. "Aye, that I do, lad. What's more, I shall be proud to serve on your ship, wherever it sails."**

**He straightens then, shrugging me off.**

**" Then I have work to do, sir." He declares.**

**" Aye, lad, that you do."**

**He begins to walk away towards the docks, stopping only as he reaches the gangplank, looking over his shoulder once. "Sir, I shall miss you."**

**I laugh. "And I you, lad, but there are no goodbyes between sailors." I motion towards the mighty ocean behind us. "I'll see you out there, lad."**

**He nods to me, and then marches down the ramp proudly, disappearing into the crowd. I shake my head and look to my old friend, Crooc.**

**" Do you remember being the lad?"**

**" Aye, that I do."**

**" We be not lads anymore, you old bastard."**

**" Nay, but we still sail." He counters. "What's next?"**

**I chuckle. "We build, what else?"**

**For my father built ships, and his father before him.**

# Once Upon A Time In Patch

**JJD: Let's do this dance Cr00cy.**

**Cr00cy: One last time into the breach, huh? Let's do it JJD.**

## Chapter 12

### Once Upon A Time In Patch

---

Glynda Goodwitch was a godmother.

She knew this.

She also knew that she had competition in that regard, competition that she was eager to meet.

Now, she just had to break away from her tagalongs before their bickering killed her. Or, far more likely, she killed them.

"We're home! This is the best!" Ruby cheered.

"Ruby, calm down!" Weiss chastised. "Besides, it's not like we're in a real city, like Atlas."

She swore that they hadn't stopped from the time the bullhead lifted off in Vale, to the time they landed at the airport in Patch. Now, as they made their way down the streets of the city, she found herself wondering if Ozpin would care if she came home with a few less students.

"Patch is way better than dumb, old Atlas!" The reaper argued.

"She's right, you know." Yang chipped in, crossing her hands behind her head. "It's too bad we couldn't convince Blake to come along, I'm sure she would have loved it."

Weiss tsked. "I'm sure that she and her 'darling' are finding ways to entertain themselves in Menagerie."

Yang chuckled. "Yeah, with the size of that bag she was dragging behind her, I'm surprised she managed to make her flight. How many toys does a girl need, huh, P-money?"

"I've got no idea what you're talking about." The redhead countered.

"Yeah, sure. I'm just saying, I think we all know that magnetic poles aren't the only ones that you're playing-"

"And, that's enough! Thank you, Miss Xiao Long." She cut in, adjusting her glasses. "I trust that you and Miss Rose can show your team around the island?"

"Sure!" The blonde agreed happily.

"Are you going somewhere, ma'am?" Weiss asked.

She hummed. "Yes, I have a business meeting to attend to. A very important business meeting."

"It isn't with Mr. Arc by any chance, is it?" Pyrrha asked hopefully.

She gave the champion a rueful smile. "No, sadly work comes first, but I'll be meeting with him tomorrow if you'd like to join me."

"I'd like that." The girl quickly agreed.

"Going after married men, P-money?" Yang teased.

The spartan flushed. "What?! No!"

"Sure~." The brawler sang.

"That would be a remarkably poor choice." Glynda confirmed.



The redhead gasped in indignation. "Ma'am, you can't possibly believe that I'd do something so immoral!"

"Immoral? Well, I suppose that would make it a poor choice as well." She said, a small smile on her lips. "Miss Schnee, do make sure that your team stays in order?"

"I'll do what I can." The heiress responded sullenly.

"It's all that I ask. That, and staying out of prison for the next few days."

"We're not that bad." Yang complained.

She raised an eyebrow. "Both you and your sister have run-ins with Vale's police force."

"Well, that's technically true." The blonde admitted.

"It is *entirely* true." She corrected, as her Scroll started beeping and she glanced down at the device. "Well, I have an appointment to keep. I'll see you all at the hotel in a few hours, do try to behave." She pleaded.

"Yes, ma'am." Yang called out with a mock salute. "You can count on us!"

"I'm sure." She drawled as she began to walk away. She tried to pretend that she couldn't hear the girls already starting to whisper behind her back.

"Guys, I know all the best nightclubs!"

They'd be fine. They had Miss Schnee.

"I think not, Xiao Long, we don't need to commit any assaults tonight." The heiress scoffed. "Besides, I'll be the judge of any and all establishments we visit."

... who might or might not be the most stable.

"Not to worry," she continued, "I'll be sure to document all my findings on Schneelp."

Miss Nikos. Miss Nikos would keep them straight.

"How common do you think the name 'Arc' is?" She heard the redhead ask.

Probably.

It didn't matter. She was teacher.

But right now?

She was a godmother before that.

---

Pyrtha Nikos was a champion.

She knew this.

She was reminded of the fact *daily* . However, there were certain people that were either unaware of this fact, or didn't care. Truth be told, either one worked for her. That taste of normalcy was something she needed now and again, and she knew Patch was the perfect place to find it. Now, she just had to find a way to steer the group towards her goal.

Yang grinned as Miss Goodwitch's form retreated into the distance. "Well, now that she's gone, let's have some fun! I've been dying to hit the beach!"

"Yeah!" Ruby cheered.

"I think not." Weiss declared. "I'm going shopping."

"But Weiss, you're the one that needs the sun the most!" Ruby whined.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Her partner growled.

Pyrrha hummed. "Nora does say you could cause snow blindness. Maybe some sun would do you good."

The heiress huffed. "If you must know, I need to purchase a bathing suit. I didn't bring one with me."

Yang groaned. "What did you think we were here for?"

"The culture!"

"The beach is Patch's culture!" The blonde exclaimed.

The white-haired girl sniffed. "Well, either way, I need a suit, so I'm going shopping. Pyrrha, will you accompany me?"

She balked. "Oh, actually, I was going to head towards-"

"P-money, go with her." Yang pleaded. "Otherwise she's going to come back with a wetsuit."

"There's nothing wrong with a little modesty, Xiao Long!"

The blonde shrugged. "I'm just saying, you gotta show a little skin."

"This is how melanoma happens!"

"We'll buy you some SPF-5000." The brawler drawled before shifting her gaze back to the champion. "P-money, make it tasteful."

She sighed. "I suppose I can manage that." At least it'd give her a chance to explore the town.

"You're a champ."

She smirked. "Four-times running."

Yang grinned. "She's got jokes!"

"Yes, yes, you're all hilarious, we'll see you at the beach when we're done. Ruby, can you take your sister away?" Weiss complained.

"But I'm not done tease-"

"You got it, bestie!" The reaper saluted smartly, before grabbing onto her sister and disappearing in a storm of petals that had Pyrrha shaking her head at their antics.

The heiress ran a hand down her face. "I envy you sometimes, Pyrrha."

"I have Nora." She countered.

"I'll trade you one Nora for two sisters." Weiss offered.

She chuckled. "I think I'm ok."

The white-haired girl sighed. "Well, I had to try. Shall we then?"

"Lead the way."

The two girls set off down the road, eyes roving over the various storefronts and cafes, idle conversation keeping them busy as they looked for a clothing store. She had to admit, so far Patch was *far* preferable to Vale. She'd only been stopped twice so far for an autograph and photo, and she was fairly certain that one of those thought she was some actress. Though the way he had leered didn't make her terribly hopeful that it was a family friendly one. After a bit, her eye caught on a shop with various outfits and swimwear displayed in the windows.

"What about that one?" She asked, pointing to the storefront.

"The one without a sign?" Weiss asked, incredulous. "Hardly impressive."

She shrugged. "They're probably just getting started. Besides, as long as they've got what you need..."

The heiress sighed. "Very well, we shall give them a try." She said, moving towards the door. The bell on it jingled softly as she pushed it open, and Pyrrha's ears perked up as a familiar voice reached her ears.

"Welcome to 'Arc and son's!' Home of all your tailoring needs!" The blond behind the counter greeted.

"Jaune!?" She called out in surprise.

The young man's face split in a wide smile. "Pyr! How have you been? What are you doing here?"

"Good! We came in with Miss Goodwitch."

He cocked his head to the side. "Notorious G? She told me that she wasn't getting in till tomorrow. I wonder what she's up to?" His eyes drifted over to Weiss, widening a bit. "Oh, who's your friend?"

"Oh, this is-"

"Weiss Schnee, heiress of the SDC and student of Beacon." The shorter girl announced proudly. "Also, less than pleased with the service so far."

"Oh, sorry about that... and the lawsuits." He mumbled.

"I'm sorry?" Weiss asked, eyebrow raised.

"Don't worry about it." He answered quickly, before leaning in. "Hey, are you single by any chance?"

The heiress balked. "I don't see what that has to with anything, but yes."

He grinned. "Pyr, you remembered!"

"Um, Jaune. I don't think that-"

The blond ignored her as he turned toward the back room of the small shop. "Merc, I need your help with a customer!"

"Coming!" They heard a voice call from the back as the silver-haired man made his way to the front. "What's up, boss?"

The blond gestured excitedly towards the white-haired girl. "This young lady requires your assistance! She's looking for a-" He blinked, glancing back at her, "what are you looking for again?"

She sighed. "A bathing suit."

"The finest bathing suit we have!" Jaune announced proudly.

The mercenary cocked an eyebrow. "You ok, boss?"

"Of course! We can't leave a lady in need though."

Weiss hummed. "That's more like it. You may lead on, sales associate."

"It's Mercury." He corrected.

"I don't recall asking."

"Stuck up little-"

"Merc!" Jaune chuckled nervously. "We can't afford to start a *third* business. We're still trying to settle the last two lawsuits."

"I can take care of those." Mercury offered.

"No!" Jaune half-shouted, before coughing into his hand. "I mean, we don't do that anymore, remember?"

"Right," the mercenary sighed, turning back to Weiss. "This way, ma'am. Is there anything in particular you're looking for?"

"Do you have anything from the 'Revolution' collection? Daddy would kill me if he knew, but I find them quite fetching." She said, allowing herself to be led off.

Pyrrha just shook her head. "I'm not sure that will end well."

"Nah, they'll be fine." He assured her with a smile. "She's beautiful, Pyr!"

"So is a rose, but it still has thorns." She deadpanned.

He waved her off. "Meh, Merc's tough. He'll figure it out."

She laughed. "Quite the optimist."

He shrugged. "Hey, it's worked out so far. How's Beacon going?"

"Better." She said, smiling. "I've even heard that Miss Goodwitch intends to find me a partner while we're here."

"Yeah?" He asked, leaning on the counter-top. "I wonder who she's talking about. There's not a lot of Patch residents with Aura."

"I'm not sure, but I hear I have you to thank for that."

He rubbed the back of his head nervously. "I mean, maybe? I wasn't sure Ozzy would hold up his end of the bargain."

She cocked her head to the side. "Ozzy?"

He opened his mouth to respond, but a series of shouts coming from further in the store cut him off.

"What do you mean, I can't 'fill it out?'" They heard Weiss screech.

"Please, I've met curvier boards!" Mercury shot back.

"How dare you! You shall apologize at once!"

The mercenary tsked. "Yeah, not really my thing. What's wrong princess, not used to hearing the truth? Daddy tell you you were special?"

Pyrrha shot a nervous glance at Jaune. "Um, shouldn't we-"

He held up a hand. "Shhh. They're bonding."

"Don't even get me started on fathers, you silver-haired halfwit! I wouldn't expect you to understand what I've been through."

The young man burst into laughter. "Really? We're really doing this? The daddy issue olympics? You got nothing on me, daddy's girl."

She huffed. "I have a lifetime of stories about neglectful fathers."

He barked a laugh. "I wish my dad was neglectful. Though I admit, I can't claim a lifetime, not anymore."

She scoffed. "You have no idea what it's like to have a legacy thrust upon you!"

"Wanna bet? Girlie, I got stories for days."

"And if I had the time, I'd show you up, but I have to meet my friends!"

Jaune nudged Pyrrha as he leaned against the counter, sending her a wink before turning back to the bickering pair. "What are you doing tonight?" He asked Weiss.

She blinked. "Nothing, that I'm aware of."



He hummed. "Well, the Vacuan restaurant down the street opens up at six, you guys could fight it out there."

Mercury tsked. "She won't show."

"I'll see you there, dolt!" She snapped back.

"Well, it's kind of upscale, you'd have to dress up." Jaune continued, Pyrrha staring on in shock.

Weiss scoffed. "Not a problem, so long as this ruffian can clean himself up."

"Sounds like you're going to get shown up twice tonight!" He growled back.

Jaune clapped his hands together, a wide grin splitting his face. "Great, sounds like a date! Now, what's say we head to the beach?"

"Wait, what?" Three voiced chorused.

---

Glynda Goodwitch stared at the smaller woman sitting across from her at their small table in the ice cream parlor.

"I'm not sure I agree with the terms of the agreement." She tried.

Neo scoffed and pointed to herself, before holding up a single finger.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, I know you were the first, but only through deception."

The multicolored girl made stabbing motions with her spoon.

"And you think that I wouldn't have if I had been there if I had known?"

Neo shrugged and mimed a crying gesture.

"No, that doesn't mean losers, weepers! It means that we're going to come to terms on this godmother business."

The girl leaned back in her chair with a sigh and motioned for her to continue.

She adjusted her glasses and nodded. "Very well, I suggest a monthly system. We switch who's going to watch over them every other month."

Neo scoffed and mimed splitting something in half.

"No, we're not going to each take one! They're sisters! Besides, I'm not sure you can compete with my financial situation." She said proudly. "My position pays quite well, I could take care of both."

The multicolored girl had a good laugh at that, before pulling out her Scroll and tapping at it for a moment and then shoving it into her face. Her eyes widened at the number displayed, and she coughed into her hand.

"Well, money isn't everything. Speaking of which, perhaps we should set a spending limit on spoiling the children."

The assassin rolled her eyes.

"They need to learn the value of a lien!" She argued.

Neo shook her head and made the 'make it rain,' gesture.

Glynda sighed. "You're insufferable. Fine, we'll come back to it. Let's talk holidays."

The smaller girl nodded and pointed to a calendar on her Scroll. Glynda leaned in for a better look, before scoffing.

"You're taking all the good ones!"

Neo held up a single finger again.

"No, you're not the number one godmother!" She ran a tired hand down her face. "We're not getting anywhere. Let's just agree that no holidays are off limits for now, yes?"

The younger girl shrugged and nodded.

"Very well, now about this other matter..."

Neo groaned in silence and fell back in her seat.

She tsked. "It's not that bad! Besides, what other options do you have? It's not like your other line of work has been busy since Roman went legitimate."

The girl mouthed 'boring.'

Glynda hummed. "And you're not bored now?"

The girl shrugged again. An annoying habit, she decided.

"Well, think of it this way, you'll be a legitimate Huntress. You get a chance to explore the world and get paid for it."

Neo raised an eyebrow and ran her spoon across her throat.

The teacher winced. "Yes, I suppose you'll get to do that too... from time to time. All you have to do is agree to be this young girl's partner."

The assassin tapped her finger on her chin, before holding up a finger again.

Glynda sighed. "Very well, what do you want?"

The girl quickly set to typing, before holding up her Scroll for her to see.

The older woman raised a brow. "You want me to be someone's date? To what?"

Neo grinned as she pulled out a well-worn notebook from beneath the table.

---

Emerald Sustrai was a thief.

She knew this.

What's more, she was a warrior, a spy, an assassin upon occasion. But currently?

She was a bartender.

She been working this shitty beach bar for the better part of six months, listening to every pick-up line under the sun, as she mixed drinks in her green bikini. So she had a theme going, sue her. But, she knew they had to maintain a cover. It was important. It was-

"Hey baby, why don't you get me a martini? Shaken, of course." The man leaning halfway across the bar said, leering at her chest.

-So goddamn hard.

"I think you've had enough." She replied evenly. Well, close to evenly.

"Nah girl, Imma need that drink... and your number." He finished with a wink.

She was aware that she should feel bad about the illusionary cobra the man was suddenly struggling with as he shrieked and fell back on the sand, it was certainly bad for business, but she just couldn't find it in herself. Plus, it was hilarious.

"I don't know what you just did, but it was awesome."

Her eyes darted over to a blonde in a yellow bikini grinning at her.

She scowled. "Can I help you?"

The girl held her hands up in a placating gesture. "Easy there, tiger. I'm familiar with Marty Mc'Douche's type." She spared a glance down at the man. "Speaking of which, shouldn't you call off... whatever that is?"

She sighed. "I suppose," she let the illusion slip, maybe a tad slower than she needed to, before turning back to the blonde. "Sorry about that, long day."

The girl shrugged. "I get it. I'm Yang, by the way."

"Emerald. What can I get you?"

"Strawberry Sunrise, please."

She nodded and began reaching for the necessary ingredients.

"So, what brings you to Patch?" The blonde asked. "Haven't seen you around here before."

Emerald shrugged as she began to mix. "Business mostly. Used to work in Vale, but it's gotten a bit wild for my taste."

Yang nodded in understanding. "The new kingpin everyone is talking about, right? What did they call him? The 'Dark Knight?' Sure he's made the city safer, but it's still weird, knowing that someone is out there pulling the strings of the underworld."

"Sure, let's go with that." She said, handing the blonde her drink. "You a local?"

"Born and raised." The girl said, saluting her with her drink.

"How do you deal with it?" She asked, pointing at the man, quickly limping off.

Yang chuckled. "You just gotta own it. Let'em know that you're in charge, and half of them will be too intimidated to make a move."

"Sure." The green-haired girl drawled.

"I'm serious!" Yang defended.

"Whatever you say, top-heavy."

The girl laughed. "Don't get many tips, do you? I can prove it."

She raised an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

"Sure," Yang said, gesturing back to the beach behind them. "Pick any guy, and I bet if I put the pressure on, they'll fold."

The tanned girl scanned the beach for a moment, before her eyes locked in on a very familiar blond boy walking with a white and red-haired girl, Mercury trailing behind sullenly.

"What about that one?" She said, nodding towards Jaune.

"The noodle?"

"Yep."

Yang shot her a questioning look. "You have weird taste."

"Please don't make me hurt you."

The blonde snorted and threw back the rest of her drink. "You're on. You owe me a Sunrise if this goes well."

"Go get'em." She encouraged.

The blonde girl saluted, before dutifully hopped off her stool and made a beeline for the young man, weaving between them beachgoers as she went. Emerald smirked as she approached Jaune, and another figure, belly bulging, started to hurriedly waddling towards the two.

"That's it, tits, pour on the charm." She laughed, watching as Cinder reached the pair. She supposed she should feel bad about this too, but hey, it'd been a long day. She was entitled to a little entertainment every now and again. To her horror however, the blonde raised her hands in surrender as soon as Cinder reached them, and then something miraculous happened. They started talking. Not getting threatened, actually talking. You know, like normal people. She felt her jaw drop as the blonde reached out, and Cinder leaned forward, letting her feel her belly, both gushing as she felt a kick.

"Sonuvabitch!" She growled. "That's some bullshit."

"Trying to go the Summer Rose route, eh?"

"What the fuck!" She shouted, almost dropping the glass she was cleaning, before glaring at the small girl who had suddenly appeared at her counter. "Where did you come from?"

Ruby shrugged. "Been here for a minute."

She tsked. "I don't know what the 'Summer Rose route' is, but I feel like I should be insulted."

"Worked out for me." The smaller girl responded.

"Are you even old enough to drink?" She questioned.

"I'm a Huntress!" The girl argued.

She rolled her eyes. "Sure you are."

"I've got an ID right here." Ruby challenged, feeling around her bathing suit. "Uh, well, not on me on me."

"Weird." Emerald deadpanned.

"You're a meanie." She pouted.

"So I've been told. Can I get you anything? Water? Something virgin? An adult?"

The red-head sighed. "Milk."

"On the beach?"

"I gotta grow!" Ruby complained, jerking a thumb back towards Yang. "I have to compete with *that* ."

Emerald chuckled as pulled a bottle out from under the counter. "Ok, I can understand that."

Ruby hummed, "Summer Rose, indeed."

"Do you want the milk or not?"

"Yes, please!" She replied, sitting up a little straighter.

Emerald sighed as she poured the girl a glass.

Just so goddamn hard.

---

Cinder Fall sighed as she fell back onto her bed in her new, somewhat more humble home.

"Jaune, I'm fat," she complained.

Her husband chuckled beside her. "I think the medical term is pregnant."

"I'm hideous, my feet hurt, walking is hard. I'm not sure why anyone does this."

"Something about continuing the human race. I'm not totally sure, but I'll get you the details. There's got to be some literature out there."



"Ha ha," she grumbled. "I blame you."

"That is technically correct." He admitted, "but I think you were there too."

"You can prove nothing."

"I mean, they have tests for that now." He laughed when she scowled. "But I think I trust you," he finished, rolling over and nipping at her nose. She squealed and pushed him away.

"You're ridiculous."

"You married me."

"Why?" She questioned.

"Because I'm apparently a lot more charming than I thought?"

She sighed, "Why do you trust me?"

"You're my wife." He answered easily.

"I lied to you, " She countered, "more than once."

"Yeah, you did," he admitted.

She sat up. "So be angry! Be mean, be something."

He shrugged and fell back onto the bed. "I tried, for awhile." He took a deep breath and let it out. "But I thought about it, and I just... couldn't. I'm not over it, but..." He hummed. "It comes in waves, I guess. Sometimes I hate it, the thought of being the fool for so long, but then I just look at you and..." He shrugged again.

"You're crazy."

"Probably."

She fell back onto the bed beside him. "I'm so sorry, Jaune."

"I know, baby."

"It's not enough. Not for what I've done."

"Maybe, maybe not. It hurts, but I can't change it. I can only choose."

She rolled over and looked into his deep, blue eyes. "I can't understand why you'd choose me."

He cupped her cheek and kissed her forehead. "Because you make me happy. Maybe that's what matters."

"It's not all that matters." She countered.

"No." He admitted, "but maybe it matters enough. I want to find out."

"You're crazy." She repeated.

"Are you going to be crazy with me?"

"Always."

He smiled as he wrapped an arm around her. "Have you thought of names for the girls?"

"Yes."

He kissed her cheek. "Are you you going to tell me?"

She sighed, "You'll laugh."

"It's possible."

She looked away and mumbled something under her breath.

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry?"

"Ember and Venus." She repeated, slightly louder, a light blush finding her cheeks.

He laughed. "You big softie!"

"Jaune Arc, you will not laugh at me!"

He grinned, "It's sweet." He comforted. "Are you ever going to tell them that you picked the names for them?"

She scoffed, "And let their egos inflate? Not on your life. Besides, if they can't figure it out, they don't deserve to know."

He chuckled and pulled her closer. "You're ridiculous."

"You married me."

"I know." He said, placing a gentle kiss on her lips. "And I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

She sighed as she pulled herself into his chest, and he held her like she was fragile, like she might break. She loved him for it.

Cinder Fall was a wife and mother.

She knew this.

---

**There is boy on a beach.**

**Sweat rolls down his back as he hacks at the tall trees that he has selected, pulling them down to the the sand and arranging them just so. Each is chosen with purpose, with pride. The work is hard, but that is not what matters, not to him.**

**What matters is the plan that forms in his mind, even if he can't yet place it into words. Even if no blueprint can yet hold his design.**

**He knows that it's there somewhere, hiding in the lumber. His ship.**

**And so he begins his labor, slowly peeling and shaping the wood, making it what it will be. He knows that he can do this, that it will be something, that it will be his. That it will sail upon the seas of the fandom.**

**He knows this, because he is a builder of ships.**

**For what else would he choose to be?**

---

**JJD: Well everyone, this is it for A Monster's Marriage, at least in this format. I've enjoyed writing this story immensely, and it's been awesome having you all along. It started off as a joke, but it became a story about a family, and one I'm glad I got to tell. The support from friends and readers alike has been unreal, and I thank you all.**

**For you rare psychopaths like me that like enjoy the mundane adventures of Jaune and Cinder's little family, I'll probably have a small collections of stories detailing their life together (because I'm weak) that I'll publish separately. But this? This is feels like a good closing point.**

**Well, I'll see you out there sailors. May the winds be with you!**

---

Also, I thought long and hard about whether or not I wanted to do this, but I decided to start a ko-fi page. I'm using it to save up money for when I stop being a pansy and decide to pursue publishing something original (don't worry, it'll be awhile before I get the nerve).

It's ko-fi dot com slash jiu\_jitsudude

If you feel like you'd like to throw in a few bucks, I'm honored. If not, I'm still going to keep on writing. It's cheaper than therapy