

Hearth & Home

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After finding freedom, an ex-villain finally obtains the one thing she never had as a child.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2023-11-17

Updated: 2024-08-12

Words: 28883

Chapters: 3

Rated: Fiction M - Language: English - Genre: Romance/Family -
Characters: Jaune A., Cinder F. - Reviews: 23 - Favs: 82 - Follows: 97

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/14299305/1/Hearth-Home>

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Chapter 1

A/N: This kind of story is a first in many ways. I don't think there are many stories about a post-redemption Cinder, let alone a story about Cinder with a family. At least I haven't seen it. Most romance stories tend to be just about them getting into a relationship, rather than telling a story about what happens after that. The biggest problem with that is that those stories often end up being railroaded and find themselves trapped in the canon storyline, dealing with Salem or even the gods, etc. I wanted to be free of that. So I decided to do something different.

Keep in mind that this is a post-redemption Cinder, so naturally she's going to be a bit different after having gone through some changes.

The story takes place post-canon after Salem has been defeated.

I don't plan on this being very long. Expect around 10-12 chapters at best and very episodic, self-contained storytelling for each chapter.

Hopefully, I've created something that Knightfall fans everywhere can enjoy.

Cinder wondered if it was possible.

She could just ask him, but...

Cinder watched Jaune hand all the goods and materials they collected from various settlements over to the farm boy. Whatever project the former vessel of the old wizard was working on was of little concern to her. She had her own dilemma.

Cinder looked towards Jaune as he began catching up with Nora.

She didn't have a clue in the world about how to even broach this topic with him.

This was the first time in her life she had ever been in a relationship. So she wasn't quite sure how these things worked. Yes, she shared her first time with him, but did that necessarily mean that Jaune loved her enough to want such a thing?

If he didn't....she supposed asking him would sound like the non sequitur of the year.

The very prospect of it sounded absurd when she spoke it aloud to herself. Usually in those quiet moments in bed when Jaune wasn't listening. It had always been one of those concepts she was vaguely aware of and knew existed but never really thought they applied to her. The very notion of Cinder Fall... and THAT? It simply didn't fit.

But ever since the fall of Salem, she and Jaune have become intimate. Very intimate. Their long nightly sessions would leave her dreaming of things she never thought she would care about. Like having a home... and being his...

A sudden girlish giggle snapped her out of her thoughts. It was Ruby. She leaped at Jaune while he grabbed her and spun her around before pulling her into a deep hug. Cinder felt her jaw tense and her brow furrow. Unable to describe the feeling that made her body stiffen.

It was hard to tell if Jaune wanted those sorts of things with her. He could be with literally anyone he wanted. He could very easily spend the rest of his life with some cute farm girl. One who had never caused him harm. Someone who could bring him joy and peace of mind. What was Cinder Fall compared to that? A murderer, born from dirt, was always told she looked sickly or a freak? Cinder only had one thing to offer him, and she didn't imagine it was any better

than what other girls could give him. At any time he wanted, he could leave, and that would be that.

Cinder looked up from the ground to watch Ruby laughing amiably with her Jaune. She liked that he was happy, but seeing Ruby made her uncomfortable.

Silver eyes met golden amber, and there was a pause. A sudden, tense atmosphere washed over them both. As if time had stopped. They exchanged looks that neither could quite identify. Like two wild animals who had just discovered an enemy and were uncertain if they should fight or walk away. It was uncomfortable. Awkward. Her hand twitched as she wondered whether she should form a weapon or not.

Eventually, Jaune broke his hug with Ruby. Having said his goodbyes. Shattering their standoff as he came over to her.

She caught one last glance from Ruby. Watching as her sclera turned black momentarily before she disappeared in a whirlwind of roses. Was that supposed to be a warning?

Cinder turned her eyes away from her and focused on Jaune. Deciding to forget about Ruby. She should feel excited. They were going on the road again. Just him and her, traveling the remains of the remnant... until he got tired of her, of course. He met someone he could really love. "Sorry Cinder. It's been fun, but I met someone who was actually worth my time. Good luck out there". Probably someone prettier. Younger too. With a good heart. Someone who wasn't a murderer-someone who could be what she never could...

He stopped when he saw her face, and she saw his eyes widen slightly. The next thing she knew, he was at her side. His palm gently caresses her cheek. It was warm. He spoke softly and sweetly. There was deep concern in his voice.

" Cinder." It was like crack to her. She feared she was becoming addicted.

" Why are you crying?"

Cinder stopped nuzzling into his palm and reached up to touch her face. Shocked when her hand came away wet. Pathetic. She used to have such a poker face.

" It's nothing." It wasn't. "I was just thinking about my old life." And the future...

He smiled and wiped her tears away with his thumb.

" You don't have to worry about that. That life is gone. There's a new future ahead. For everyone."

What about us? Do we have a future?

" You too?"

He laughed as they began walking towards their ride.

" Of course."

Will I be in it?

"Jaune, what kind of future do you think I will have?"

With hands on her hips, he hefted her into the carriage.

" What kind of future do you want?"

" I don't know."

Coward!

He shifted in beside her. Extra close so that they were joined at the hip. He laced his fingers with hers. Squeezing her little hands gently and planting a kiss on her knuckles, which had her heart doing

somersaults. It was strange how, even after all the stuff they'd done, these little things could still affect her so much.

" Don't worry. You've got plenty of time to figure it out."

I already know what I want.

Cinder didn't take her eyes off him, even as he broke contact with her and reached for the reins. He whipped the horses into motion, and they departed on their bumpy journey once more. Ready to explore the world and likely save more towns along the way.

The carriage rattled as the horses galloped across the uneven dirt road. The lingering question in her mind screamed at her again. Climbing it's way out of the ocean of thoughts, she once tried to drown it in until it broke through the surface, desperately gasping for breath. It yelled at her once more. The amount of hope it filled her with was almost terrifying. She could hear her heart pounding in her ears. In all her years of life, Cinder never thought it was okay for her to wish for such a thing. Simply accepting her fate. The lies she was told. The ones she told herself. Over time, she began to believe that wishing for such a thing was impossible. Something for the weak. So she sought refuge in power. To make people fear her instead.

"Jaune, do you think..."

" Hm? What is it?"

In reality, all she was doing was hiding. It was a mask. A layer of denial to hide from what she really wanted... but she had it now, didn't she? Against all odds, she had something that everyone told her she would never have. Did he not save her life when he had all the rights to kill her? Shown her kindness when she deserved nothing less than scorn and disgust? What she wanted was right in front of her. It should be okay for her to reach for it... shouldn't it?

She didn't know what it took to be worthy of that position in someone's life.

Cinder took a deep breath.

" Do you think I could be your wife?"

But she was going to try.

Days like this would've seemed foreign to her younger self. Sitting on some big fluffy couch in a warm homemade blue sweater, some black leggings, and a fluffy pair of slippers. She took another sip of coffee before placing it back down on the counter before continuing her project.

Sewing came naturally to Cinder. It was an activity that once gave her a great piece of mind back in the days when she was locked away in the Glass Unicorn. She could clearly remember the cold, lonely weekends where the Madam would leave and she was to remain locked away in the storage basement until she returned. She would sit for hours on end sewing outfits for herself. Playing pretend. Making pretty dresses that looked like the fancy customers of the hotel. Things she wished she could wear. She could remember hoping to one day wear pretty outfits of the same kind. Her head was filled with dreams of being seen as pretty and not the sickly slave she actually was.

She wasn't that little girl anymore. She was a grown woman, fully confident in her appearance. Scars and all. Though she no longer sews dresses. Nowadays, it's mostly boys' clothes. Her children needed clothing, so she decided to make them all herself. Which is what she is doing now. She sews together a shirt for her youngest son. So she ended up busting out the old thread and needle and making it her new project to work on this week.

Normally, this would be a rather peaceful and comforting activity.

She looked over at Jaune, eating his lunch in the kitchen. A tight white T-shirt showing off his well-built form and baggy training pants. While his long hair, tied into a pony tail, hung over his shoulder. They

had just come up from the basement gym after finishing a light workout. Which would normally result in them getting physical with each other. Sadly there was none of that today. Before that, Jaune had slept all morning. Meaning they didn't engage in their usual morning intimacy. That's how tired he was. Which was extremely rare for Jaune, but that wasn't entirely the issue here. It was his mood. Jaune had been going on missions back and forth for a few weeks now. Some intense battles with another rising syndicate. She offered to go with him, but they had no one to watch the boys that month since their usual babysitter, Emerald, was unavailable. He had crushed them, of course, but since then he's been distant. Something happened that he didn't tell her about. So she sought to give him his space, thinking that would help.

It did not. Leaving her unsure of how to improve his mood.

Cinder was not one who was good with emotions. For years, she bottled them up and exploited them in others, but this was a new kind of problem she was unused to dealing with. They had gone through emotional hurdles before, but she wasn't quite sure what to make of this. She just wanted Jaune to be happy again. What was a wife supposed to do? What would a good wife do?

She didn't know, but she knew that she couldn't allow this to continue.

Cinder stopped working on her son's shirt, having just run out of thread. Thinking this was a good opportunity, she got up from the couch and called over to her husband.

"Jaune." Her voice was innocent and questioning.

He looked up from his meal and tried to put on a bright smile for her. Even though she could tell he wasn't feeling it,

"I need you to come with me to the market today. Is that okay?"

"Sure, I don't have any problem with that. Why would you need my help, though?"

Cinder merely shrugged.

"I don't like walking through town by myself. They give me strange looks."

He had a laugh at that. A genuine one. Good. It always filled her with an immense sense of pride to know she could bring a smile to his face. Just like his friends could. Just like Ruby.

"Cinder, they practically revere you. I wouldn't be shocked if they thought you were some high queen ruling over the town."

The thought of which made her cringe. Her foolish younger self might've wanted such a thing, but now she just finds the idea creepy and annoying. Undue praise was just as irritating as the unjust hate she used to receive as a child. She came out here to be with her family in peace. Not put up with strangers. Regardless, she was certain what they felt was fear, not reverence.

"Is that so?" She responded. Smoothly extending her hand for him to take. "Then would it trouble the King to escort his Queen on a small excursion into town?"

Jaune's smile returned as he took it.

"Not at all."

The walk to town was a pleasant one. The fresh morning air wafted over her form like nature's morning yawn, while the movement of leaves and the wild beasts hidden out of sight all alerted her senses as she walked down the flower-laden path. Cinder wanted any townspeople to be a decent distance away from their home. So their house was nearly a mile from town. While she no longer possessed the maiden powers, she could have easily flown such a distance

given her new abilities. However, a walk with Jaune was far more pleasant, and her semblance would just cause a commotion. They zigged and zagged through the maze of trees they created to protect their home from intruders. Aimlessly chit-chatting about this and that as they trotted along. From telling him about whatever little project she was working on, to what food they would eat for breakfast every day if they could, to what they would do during a zombie apocalypse. Nonsensical, of course, but it was good to distract him. To get him talking again.

It reminded her of the times after Salem's curse was finally lifted. They would chat for hours about nothing. They were just comfortable in each other's presence, while both were secretly amazed at how much they had in common. It made her reflect on how much they could have missed out on if they'd stayed enemies. Cinder had once believed she could never communicate with anyone. So she always hid her real self. She was always called a weirdo and a freak, but she never felt like that with Jaune.

They continued to walk, chat, and enjoy the scenery surrounding the path to their home when Cinder spotted the first few houses coming into view through the trees.

Phoenix Island was a thankfully peaceful and happy place for the most part. Which made it an anomaly when you considered the current state of the world. Certainly not like any of the towns she had often traveled to when growing up either. Admittedly, she didn't like the idea of people setting up homes near them initially, but she has tolerated it now since the people have never bothered her or her family.

They'd just entered through the edge of town, only to be met with the bustling activity that accompanied their little village. Loud conversations, children shouting and playing, and active merchants trying to sell their latest crops and other assorted goods. Which was good news for Cinder, as she was hoping Miss Mulberry was selling today.

Her thoughts came to an abrupt halt when she looked to her left and didn't see Jaune. A brief fit of anger flared up within her, but it soon quelled as she quickly scanned through the crowd of people. She didn't even need to sense him, as she soon spotted him more than a few meters away. He stood in front of a crying child as he chastised a group of older-looking kids in front of him. They ran off, and she caught up just in time to hear the little girl thank him as she rubbed tears from her eyes. The kid flinched when she saw her, though, and scurried off to go find her parents.

"What was that about?"

"Bullies. You know how it is."

She did, indeed. Cinder had vented to him many years ago about all the things she kept inside and never spoke of. He was certainly no stranger at all to bullying either.

Before she could reply, she sensed something was wrong and studied his face. Same expression he had when he came back from his mission. He was thinking about it again; she was sure.

Cinder frowned.

"I don't appreciate you ditching me like that."

That snapped him out of it. As if he suddenly realized he'd made an idiotic mistake. He palmed his face.

"Sorry. I didn't realize. I saw them, and I just moved."

Cinder still pouted. She didn't like being ditched, but whatever was going through his head was bothering her the most.

"Hmph. If you're feeling repentant, you can make it up to me later."

She laced fingers with him this time as she walked towards Miss Mulberry's place.

Cinder looked over the various rolls of thread, scissors, needles, buttons, and clips laid out in front of her. She picked up the metallic gold thread and a couple of extra buttons since she was missing a few, before reaching into her bag and pulling out the animal fur and still frozen meat she'd brought along with her. Miss Mulberry thought she was really generous for giving her fur for clothes and fresh meat, all for a little thread, but Cinder merely shrugged. It's not as though it was hard for her to acquire, but then again, the lonely woman couldn't hunt for herself and often had very little to trade for it. Cinder could see why she considered it generous. However, her family didn't have any difficulty hunting at all, so parting with some spare meat meant nothing. Though if she were being honest, she would have parted with just about anything when her young ones were involved.

Speaking of which,

Cinder straightened her back, and her voice went up an octave.

"The boys caught this one."

"Oh, did they now?"

Cinder nodded eagerly, ignoring the woman's nervousness entirely.

"The boys are getting so much better at hunting now. They're much more efficient and lethal than before."

Miss Mulberry's face began to grow pale.

"L-lethal?"

"Oh yes. My oldest two were already so strong, but even my littlest one has become a dangerous hunter. He had always lagged behind his brothers, but I knew he had some killer in him."

The thought of those little tyrants becoming even stronger...

"Jaune and I train with them often. They're all growing so fast. I can't wait to teach them how to use weapons!"

Miss Mulberry thought she might faint.

Cinder went on about how her oldest cracked open the skull of some large beast all by himself. Or how the second child discovered some new form of poison. Or how the smallest one ate enough food to feed several entire families. As if they didn't all have witness to the youngest one's horrifying appetite firsthand during last year's pie competition. She continued incessantly ranting about the things her little deviants were up to for what felt like an hour until the lonely woman finally noticed that the beautiful blonde man she often liked to ogle at was nowhere to be seen.

"Your husband isn't with you?"

"Hm? Oh yes, he's-"

Cinder looked up to find Jaune several meters away, chatting with some townsfolk. Jaune thought the people here loved her, but it was him they loved to see. However, they couldn't see what she could.

She stared at him for a moment before her thoughts turned back to her current dilemma. Ultimately, she'd done nothing to ease his pain. Nor come up with a solution. She'd thought getting him out would help, but it didn't seem to have worked. At this rate, all she'd do is return home to the same problem. Maybe she'd done all she could for today? Maybe she could try something else tomorrow? But what?

As she pondered this, Miss Mulberry, whom she forgot was here, turned to her with a curious look.

"Something wrong, Mrs. Arc?"

"I..."

Cinder hesitated. She was wary of revealing their personal business to a stranger. She may have liked Miss Mulberry, but it's not as though they were friends. She didn't have anyone she could talk to in town since Mrs. Oats had passed years ago, but Mulberry had once had a well-off marriage and family before they were all killed by Grimm. So she knew what it was like to be married for a long time.

Besides, at this point? If it were to help Jaune, She would take any advice she could get.

"I don't know what to do."

"Pardon?"

"It's Jaune. He's going through something. Something happened on a mission, and he won't tell me about it."

Miss Mulberry was shocked for a moment. Surprised to see the famously tight-lipped Queen actually opening up to her of all people. She must truly be bothered.

"You tried talking to him?"

"Of course! But he avoids the question! Even though I know it's making him upset. What am I to do? How do I make him feel better?"

Cinder stared down at Mulberry's wooden table, full of various items.

She truly was no good at this. Ruby would have known what to say. She would have made him feel better. Or his friends would. They were kind and loving from the bottom of their souls. They knew how to help people. She was only good at ending them.

"Most spouses tend to have this problem."

Cinder's head shot up, and she looked the older woman in the eyes. Giving her her full attention.

"Men and women often don't know how to communicate, it seems. Failing to properly talk about your issues could lead to decades of problems. I may not be an expert myself, but I do know that such conversations can only start when one person is willing to be open about their feelings first."

Cinder was silent as she let the woman's words sink in. She scanned her eyes for any sign of deceit, but it didn't take an expert to know that the woman spoke the truth. Once upon a time, such a conflict tore the world apart. All because two people failed to communicate and handle their problems together. She didn't want that to be her and Jaune. She thought back to the first night she vented everything in her life to Jaune. Was it not he who had made himself vulnerable first so that she would feel comfortable telling him everything? It seemed she would have to be the brave one this time. But still, that couldn't be all there is to it.

"And what do I do after that?" she asked.

"Sex." Mulberry answered simply.

Cinder's eyebrows were raised.

"Even though he's upset?"

Miss Mulberry laughed. " *Epecially* because he's upset. Most couples don't know this, but during times of strife, it's far better to lean into sex than to pull back and create distance. You want to deepen your emotional connection. Not sever it. Sex is the main tool that allows you to do so. It's a couple's love language. After you exchange words, it'll be good to let your bodies talk."

Cinder was stunned. She and Jaune had sex often. Really often, in fact. Yet here she was, believing that giving that up this time was the way to go. That was a mistake.

The former maiden turned to her elderly advisor and smiled.

"Miss Mulberry.... Thank you."

The woman smiled.

"You're welcome, madame, but if you ask me, it seems you have a whole new problem on your hands."

Cinder looked confused, but the woman nodded in the direction of her husband. She turned, and Jaune was no longer surrounded by his kind fellows of the village. He was surrounded by women. Each chatting him up, batting their eyes, and taking every chance to put their hands on his chest or wrap an arm around his bicep. Jaune merely smiled and laughed. Brushing them off as if they were just being very friendly. They were about to be very dead.

Cinder thanked Miss Mulberry again before collecting her things and stomping away from her booth to go chase the women away. Some of them saw her coming. One look at her glare, and all of them immediately ceased contact with Jaune. One she recognized from her previous attempts to seduce her husband, fled the scene entirely.

Yeah, you better run, bitch.

Try as she might, Cinder could not stop her hands from shaking. Claspng them together in her lap did not help. To say she was nervous was an understatement.

Mrs. Oats sat across the room from her. A 4'5 woman with bushy gray hair, freckles, and a warm coffee-colored complexion Her hands were busy scribbling down in her notebook as if her home and her office were not destroyed, and she was still the town therapist doing her job as usual. Cinder had been visiting her for a couple years now. Jaune had been taking her to this town whenever they traveled together to get whatever supplies they could to help Oscar build a new kingdom to unite Remnant under. She felt the need to work on herself, so he agreed and found her someone who might help her

work out some of her issues. Though when Jaune usually took her here, she was not usually in such a condition.

The dull gray of the psychiatrist's office had reminded her of one of those old black-and-white noir films she'd watched with Jaune and his friends. It was duller than Mercury's personality. Except the room looked as though a bomb had gone off in it and torn off the other half of the building. Which apparently it had. Metal pipes and wooden planks stuck out and hung loosely from the sides of the broken part of the room. The silence was occasionally broken by the scurrying of vermin across the ashen wooden floors. If she turned to her left, she could see the ruins of the small town. Still an absolute warzone. The stench of burning flesh and smoke nearly made her want to start coughing. She glanced at Jaune from where she sat. She watched him across the road, guiding the remaining citizens to safety as they huddled together, marching through rubble with the goal of finding a new home.

Mrs. Oats continued her line of questioning.

"That's quite a fascinating chain of events. It looks like you two have been through a lot. So what did he say after you asked him?"

Cinder's hands clasped in front of her mouth as if in prayer, and she held her breath.

" He said yes."

Mrs. Oats stopped scribbling and looked at Cinder through those thick-rimmed glasses of hers.

" So what is the problem?"

" That IS the problem!"

The elderly woman leaned back in her chair and stared at Cinder.

" Explain."

Cinder took a deep breath for what felt like the millionth time that day. "I'm frightened." There was a long pause as Cinder gathered her thoughts, trying to make sense of the storm of emotions whirling within her. Anxiety, fear, love, and hope picked up weapons of insecurity and happiness alike and went to war in her heart. Each trying to claim dominion over her soul. "I'm not sure what I expected. I think I was preparing for the worst. For everything to suddenly turn out to be a lie. To be brought back down to earth for my hubris, and then he just... says yes." Hope landed a devastating blow and crumbled fear to its knees. "He just says yes, like it's nothing! What am I even supposed to do with that? He made it sound so simple. L-Like it's..." Her lips began to tremble. The absolute elation from that moment rushed back to her. She couldn't help the snuffle that came out of her. "Like, it's so easy to love me." Cinder hated the way her voice cracked. She hated her stutter. God, she sounded pathetic. What happened to her? How did she become reduced to this mess of a woman? This was all Jaune's fault! Cinder gulped back the knot in her throat just as Mrs. Oats interjected.

"I see. You spent so long never believing it was even possible, and now that it actually happened, you don't know what to do."

Cinder fought back the tears as she nodded. She never thought that she would get this far. Truth be told, Cinder was happier than she'd ever been in her life. She never thought she could be this happy. Which was equal parts liberating as it was terrifying. "I don't know if I have what it takes to be someone's family. I've never had one before. All I've ever done is destroy. That's all I've ever done. What if... what if I destroy this too?" Cinder ran her hands through her hair and gripped her head as if it were in pain. That was probably the thought that haunted her dreams the most. The idea of her having everything she wanted-only to destroy it all with her own hands- She had woken up more than once in a cold sweat because of such nightmares during their travels. Expecting to have burned down their campsite and Jaune along with it. Completely forgetting that her powers were different now and the maiden powers were long gone.

"What if all I can offer him is more pain?"

"Cinder, dear, you can't think like that."

"But what if it's true?"

Mrs. Oats paused and took a good look at Cinder before sighing to herself.

"Should we try my semblance again?" She asked.

Cinder was expecting it. Since Mr. Oat's semblance was the reason she was so successful as the town therapist, Remembrance, she called it. The power to take people into their past memories, allowing them to deal with their traumas directly. She had done this with Cinder over the course of their meetings, and it had genuinely helped her heal many of her past emotional scars.

Cinder nodded, and the elderly woman reached out her hand. Cinder took it.

"Remember, child, my semblance only works if you agree to it. Do you wish to dive into your heart and find the root of your pain?"

Cinder nodded once more. "Yes".

"Very well. Just like we always do. Close your eyes. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in..."

As Cinder performed the ritual, Mrs. Oat's voice began to fade away. Along with the world.

Suddenly, she was somewhere else. Somewhere familiar. Somewhere cold.

It was that old, dirty basement. Her previous "home". The Glass Unicorn. The only light that graced this place was that of the cracked moon. She could still feel the horrible dust beneath her feet and in

the air. It clung to her skin and made her feel disgusted. Like a constant reminder that she was dirt. That was when a sound caught her attention. A sickly Flem-filled cough and a snotty snuffle Followed shortly by sobbing. She looked over to the closet door across the room and suddenly found herself standing in front of it without having walked. She merely touched the door. Cinder was outside of it and inside of it at the same time. She could feel the other. Holding her head in her hands. She was shivering from the cold. Crying. Crying hard. Wondering what she did wrong. Why does everything always hurt? She cried until she passed out from exhaustion, only to do it all again the next day.

Cinder's heart pounded in her chest as the memory hit her like a ton of bricks. She had fallen that day. Broke dishes. The madam had beaten her for it, and people had merely looked on. Without a care. Continuing to laugh and party above, Cinder went to sleep to the sound of her own sobs.

Her head became dizzy, and the world spun again.

This time, the scene was different. It was the streets. The cold, bustling streets of Atlas. She remembered this. It was after she had killed Madame. Killed Rhodes. She had been hiding in an alleyway while the police investigated the hotel. When she walked by the buildings, she noticed the news reports talking about them. "A beautiful, hard-working business owner was killed along with her innocent daughters." It claimed. "Brave Huntsman killed trying to protect the family." The whole city grieved and mourned the loss of Madame and her family. Cinder remembered the bile that rose in her throat. The way they heaped sympathy and praise on the madam. The same people who looked dismissively at her as she was abused cared so deeply about her and her children. They were loved.

Cinder remembered the pain in her chest. When she begged for a jacket to keep warm, people recoiled in disgust. How she had to kill herself again to clothe herself. No one would give anything to her. She had to take it. Cinder could see herself across the street. At the

back of the alley. She was shivering in the coat of the woman she killed as the people walked past her. Wondering where her next meal would come from.

She took a step toward her younger self. Into the traffic. I was still not quite sure of what to do, and the world spun again.

It was cold again. Even colder than before.

Her feet crunched in the snow as she walked. Even though it was just a memory, she still squinted as the roaring blizzard blew frost into her eyes. Forcing her to bring up a hand to shield her face. Her hair was whipping in the wind as the cold lashed at her features. Looking up briefly, she could see her treasure. The thing that kept her sane throughout her nights at the Glass Unicorn The memory of the beautiful blue of the night sky sparking with bright stars was a sight that always warmed her heart and sparked her imagination and dreams of freedom. Cinder looked around again, and through the blizzard, she noticed a faint light. A bright orange glow was in the distance. The memory slowly seeped in, and she realized where she was. This was when she escaped from Atlas entirely. She managed to flee the Kingdom and Mantle and make it to the outer parts of the continent. Only to find more freezing cold. She appeared in front of herself once again, just like the first memory. Young Cinder was huddled under the coat she had stolen. Having started a fire with her semblance, Her aura was fading as she struggled to keep it burning.

Young Cinder's coat was suddenly blown from her shoulders. Stolen by the fierce winds The fire quickly went out.

Cinder couldn't help but shiver as the thoughts came back to her. She huddled over in the snow, thinking death was soon upon her. Knees are slowly being gnawed at by the frost. The child Cinder's thoughts would flood the children who she saw frequent the Glass Unicorn. Being hugged by their mothers and fathers. Their family. They must've been warm. Tears of frustration felt cold against her cheeks. They were both crying now, it seemed.

Young Cinder struggled and failed to ignite her flame even further.

She remembered what would happen now. Cinder would use her memories to remind herself just how much she hated Madam. She hated her daughters. Hated Atlas. It was the only thing that ever kept her warm. The heat she created from that would carry her another mile. Right to where she first met Salem.

Her adult self finally knew what to do.

Young Cinder soon found herself shrouded in flames. Flames of a much different color than her own. The flames did not burn. Nor were they hot. Yet they provided warmth all the same. Warmth that spread from her heart to her whole body like a warm cup of hot chocolate. The cold could no longer reach her.

It was then that she finally noticed her. Her older self.

Pure astonishment was shown on her young face as she stared up at the older woman. The resemblance was immediately noticeable, despite her scars. Instantly, Cinder could see the hope forming in her own young eyes.

"A... A-Are.... Are you.....?" Her tiny voice cracked and wavered. Sheer disbelief, combined with desperation and hope, seeped into her voice. "W-who are you?"

She didn't get the chance to say anything else as Cinder knelt down and wrapped her arms around her. Embracing her with a tight hug, the warm flames shrouded them both. Much to the frustration of the blizzard.

"Someone who loves you," she said. Cinder found that she meant it with all her heart. Cinder rubbed little Cinder's back and told her it was going to be okay. Young Cinder began to cry. "I love you," she repeated to herself. Over and over again in her ear as she rubbed her back. "I love you." Young Cinder could only sob harder, wrapping

her arms around her older self. She didn't know who this woman was and didn't care. She clung to the source of warmth regardless.

It did not last long, however. Cinder's semblance flickered and began to run out, and a new wave of cold and darkness crept over the horizon.

" Cinder". It whispered.

" W-what is that!?" Her younger self looked horrified. Staring at the formless black mass, a vast army of red eyes appeared in the distance. Cinder knew what it was. Who it was.

" Come here, Cinder." It whispered again.

Her semblance faded, and suddenly they were both cold once more.

" NO!"

Just as Cinder thought she would be taken again by the darkness, A golden blanket appeared out of nowhere. Draped over her skin, embracing them both. Filling her with a familiar feeling that reignited her semblance. Chasing away both the cold and the darkness. The strength it provided shined brightly. All at once, her power felt limitless. She could do anything as long as it was here. The ice around them melted completely, and the blizzard completely stopped in its tracks. Turning her memory of Solitas into a barren wasteland of damp soil with not a trace of ice. No more cold. No more Grimm.

She looked down at her younger self again as they basked in the warmth of her semblance and the sheet of gold light that embraced them. Surprisingly, young Cinder hugged her once more. Looking up at her with rosy cheeks. Nose red and puffy from the frost, and ears red-tipped. "Thank you," she said with a tearful smile. With a smile so bright, she shone like the sun. Slowly, the body of young Cinder began to fade into nothing. She shimmered like stardust. Then... she disappeared.

When she did, Cinder's heart was left feeling full. Like a piece of a puzzle that she didn't know was missing, it was suddenly put into place. With that, the memory faded.

Cinder jumped up with a start. Exiting Mrs. Oats's semblance, she found herself still overflowing with power. The warm golden blanket had yet to disappear. It was a power she knew all too well.

" Sorry. I thought you might've needed my help."

Both women turned to see Jaune, having come over from guiding the townsfolk to safety. It appears there was a bit of a bandit situation, as he was carrying several of the brutish thugs over his shoulder and under his arm. They groaned as he dropped them. She almost smirked at their beat-up faces and broken bones. That looked like fun. She wished she could've joined him.

Cinder got up and walked over to him.

" I take it that you found the problem. What was it?" he asked.

She smiled. "Just... something I really needed to hear."

She looked up at Jaune. Grin is still on her face. She was reminded of how he stood up for her after Salem fell. He stood his ground with her on his back and said that she deserved to be free in the face of everyone who wanted to see her executed for her crimes. Prepared to fight every last one of them if need be to ensure it. However foolish it was.

" A little bit of fear is normal," the elderly woman said. "I know you've had a hard life, dear... and I don't know who you were before, but the woman I see before me now? She is not a destroyer. The furthest thing from it. You two have something truly special. Don't let the past stop you from learning to love and be loved."

Hand in hand with her fiance, Cinder turned towards her longtime therapist... and friend. She smiled.

" I won't."

The light of the moon drifted in from the open window into their master bedroom. Which Cinder opened to let the breeze in. This, of course, came with the nightly sounds of crickets and the gentle splashing of the waves in the lake by their house. They'd made it back several hours ago, and since then, they've all had dinner. After which, she put the boys to sleep. Jaune was his usual self at dinner, but every now and then she'd catch some of the melancholy seeping onto his face when the boys weren't looking.

It frustrated her. She hadn't done what Miss Mulberry suggested yet. By the time she was done putting away the dishes, Jaune was already busy giving the boys their bath. She'd then gone to the basement until it was her turn to send them to bed. Only to hear him step outside as she was tucking the boys in. She thought she'd simply wait for him as she planned the activities for the next day.

So Cinder continued to scribble in her daily planner. She was planning out her homeschooling schedule for the boys and detailing their progress. They were fairly young, but they had already passed her basic math lessons and had developed a love for reading. Something she had developed along with them. She had initially hated stories as a child, but seeing her own children's faces light up as she read them stories, sparked her own genuine love for the old tales she once regarded as childish nonsense. Something anyone should be ashamed to read. Now, however, she read them openly. When she thought about it, her life wasn't so different from a fairy tale either. She certainly never, in her wildest dreams, ever imagined she'd meet her "prince charming". It wasn't all perfect, of course. She'd be a fool if she expected anything of the sort. But it was a life worth living, no matter what. It was something she was determined to keep at any cost.

Cinder felt like Jaune was drifting away from her. Maybe she was exaggerating, but that's how it often started. Or so she'd heard. She hadn't entirely grown out of the clingy girlfriend she once was, and the fear of those she loved one day leaving her still hung in the back of her mind. So Jaune's being emotionally distant in any capacity was rather alarming.

She stopped writing and put the pen down. She ran her hands through her hair and stared at the collection of books, notes, a letter from Blake, and flowers from her garden laid out over her desk. She finished the last of her tea that had long since gotten cold and the last two biscuits left on her plate before deciding to go check on Jaune.

Cinder closed her eyes and focused her aura. Mentally extending her senses outward. She picked up on Jaune's aura immediately. He was rather hard to miss. Jaune's aura was so huge, she'd spot it from a mile away. In her mind's eye, she could see the bright, husband-shaped star in the blackness of space. He was to the right of their home, in the sitting position. Definitely in the lake. Which meant he was likely night-fishing again. If his posture was anything to go by, She smiled and slid her chair back. She got up from her desk and headed over to the window.

It'd be much easier to fly down to him than going out the front door.

Jaune stared at the fixed moon's reflection in the water. A full, complete moon. Something he was still getting used to. He'd grown up with a broken moon, after all. The gods had fixed it when they came back. It felt like the world had been restored a little bit, but it certainly wasn't all sunshine and roses. People were still pretty broken, as was society. It was all up to them to pick up the pieces after the fall of Salem. The brothers had left again, so it wasn't like they could rely on them to solve all their problems. Not that he wanted to. People mostly rely on the maidens these days.

But having an all-powerful being to turn to at times like this would have been helpful. He was starting to think that maybe they shouldn't have rejected the gods offer to stay on the remnant.

Jaune could only sigh as he let the stress from his latest mission roll off him. Trying to focus on fishing instead.

The night air was cool and peaceful. The croaking of frogs and the gently rocking of the boat were things that typically put his mind at ease. Sadly, that wasn't the case tonight. He began to reel in his line since he wasn't catching anything when he noticed a moving mass of blue light reflecting in the water. A sound akin to someone flapping a large blanket in the wind could be heard, accompanied by a sudden whooshing of flames.

Like a creature straight out of myth, she descended onto the boat. Rocking it slightly. Jaune didn't need to look up to know who it was.

"It's getting late, you know."

"I was just about to head in." He paused to put away his fishing rod. "You put the kids to sleep already?"

Cinder merely strode over to where he sat. Taking a seat beside him and snuggling up next to him.

"Only after reading them their favorite story."

"Which one was that again?"

"The one about the dragon and the knight."

"Ah, I remember that one. The knight set out to kill the dragon, only to end up falling in love with her. Doesn't the dragon become something else in the end?"

"Mhm. She does. She becomes her true self. Right before she runs off with the knight."

"I don't blame her. That guy was charming."

She playfully slapped his shoulder.

"What? It's true. Man seduced a whole dragon."

Cinder could only roll her eyes as they shared a laugh.

"Catch anything?"

"No. It looks like they're not biting tonight."

"I see..."

There was a long pause where the two of them just sat in silence. Enjoying each other's company under the starlit night sky and the home that they built together.

"She was really happy."

"Who?"

"The Dragon. I think it was knowing she had someone to rely on. That's what saved her. When she was reborn... I think it happened because she wanted the knight to be able to rely on her as well. I think that was the first time she wanted to be a pillar of strength for someone else."

Jaune could only stare at her in silence. Trying to process what she was getting at.

"Cinder?"

"Maybe you don't always have to tell me everything, but I can tell clearly that something is bothering you. Just... just tell me... is it my fault? Am I to blame for anything?"

He spun to look at her.

"What? No!"

"O-ok. Good."

"Sorry I... I know I've been a bit distant lately. I've just had a lot on my mind." He sighed. "I guess I should explain from the beginning. Look, Cinder, during the mission, I was chasing the leaders of this cartel."

Cinder sat patiently and listened to his story. Thinking back on how she thought he might've been betraying her just feels utterly silly now. Jaune's tale was utterly horrifying. Or at least it would be to most people. A nightmare of human brutality and depravity. It was humanity at its worst. Something she had seen much of in her youth but the things Jaune spoke of made even her stomach turn. However, that wasn't the worst of it. It was what they had done to a child at the end. Apparently, by the time he cornered one of the crime lords, he'd found her in a room full of child slaves. Though most of them were dead, it wasn't any mystery as to what they'd been doing there. The crime lord, former Huntress Gilles, was using the children for... her own "needs," for lack of a better term. Jaune happened to catch her in the act. She was arrested and executed, of course. Which she nodded in approval of as he told it. The boy Gilles was using, on the other hand, had a story that made her heart sink. He'd taken his own life afterward. Even after Jaune promised to take him home, He was horrified by the prospect of continuing to live in this world.

"It made me think about a lot." He started, "I couldn't help but think back on all the things you'd gone through before we met. If I could have helped you sooner."

"But you did. You did that when no one else would."

She took his hand, lacing her fingers with his. Giving him a gentle squeeze. Which he returned.

"I know." He smiled. "But it's not just that. It's the boys. It made me think about what kind of world we're bringing them into. What's the right way to raise them? As Huntsmen? As ordinary citizens? Are they going to be okay brought up in all this..."

He watched Cinder stand up without letting go of his hand. Clutching it to her chest as she stood in front of him. Gently stroking his cheek

"We raise them strong. With good values. We raise them with the best parts of both of us. Let them learn from our failures and mistakes. Isn't that what we decided?"

He remembered. He just wasn't sure if that was enough. Not anymore. And he told her so.

"Jaune, it's all we can do."

He stared into her eyes. Beautiful amber. Like the sunset. Something he had long ago decided was his favorite color. In them, he found love in its purest form. As well as raw conviction.

"When did you get so protective?"

"I have always coveted what's mine. Especially when my husband gave me the greatest gift anyone's ever given me." She put her forehead against his. "I'll do anything to protect it."

He could feel her body heat through her thin sleepwear. He began to notice her scent, rosy cheeks, and perfect lips. His hands found her waist, and he ran them up and down her wide hips as she settled into his lap. She ran a hand through his blonde locks while the other snaked around his neck. She locked him in place as she shoved her tongue into his mouth.

The kiss was intense. Both expressed a hunger they had almost forgotten about. With Cinder on his lap, the area between them was suddenly soaked, and he had a feeling it wasn't him.

Jaune broke the kiss. Lightly biting her lip as they parted. She looked frustrated and horny. Her confused expression asked him why he stopped.

"Let's take this upstairs."

She grinned at that as Jaune picked her up by her thighs and leapt off the boat over to their house. They made out all the way up the stairs.

When Jaune threw her on the bed, he silently prayed that the soundproof walls would be enough to contain her voice.

Looking back on all she'd been through and all that she overcame, Cinder truly was an amazing wife. Even if she didn't believe it.

It was a good thing that he intended to show her.

So that's the end of the first chapter. This was supposed to be short. Unfortunately, that's not how it turned out. This was a brief introduction to Jaune and Cinder's relationship. As you may have noticed, Cinder doesn't have maiden powers anymore. Which is part of what spawned this story. "What would it be like if Cinder no longer cared about the Maiden powers?" She no longer chases a false identity or needs external validation to feel whole or complete. She has abandoned her "Fall" identity entirely and embraced being an "Arc". She is no longer the girl who chased magic in a desperate attempt to feel special or to feel like she mattered. That is a very important part of the story. I'm not sure if that bothers anyone, but I always felt as though her learning she didn't need them would be massive growth for her. Ironically, she ended up pretty powerful anyway.

The world itself is kind of messed up. The conflict with the gods was resolved, but a lot of places are looking like post-WWII Germany. Things weren't just going to be magically fixed

overnight. The idea of all human conflict ending forever and there being perpetual peace just sounds silly to me. So I imagine that while they proved their worth to the gods, they would still have a lot of work to do once they were gone.

I will also be playing around with interesting concepts and aspects of the world that aren't explored very much. One Piece has been a horrible influence on my world-building tendencies. This entire story is infected with it. So I apologize for that beforehand. You have been warned. I'll be trying not to go over 5k words for each chapter, but it seems I've already failed horribly.

That's all for now. Next chapter, you'll get to meet the kids.

Chapter 2

Sorry this one took so long. I initially had this chapter all written and ready to upload but then I read through it again and wasn't satisfied. Then I ended up re-writing it entirely from scratch.

I struggled for a while to get the tone right since this chapter is much more light-hearted than the previous one. The last chapter was a tad moody so I wanted to give you guys something a little more fun. So I was aiming for more of a Saturday morning cartoon vibe for this episode.

Not sure if I succeeded but I am satisfied with how it came out. I did say I was taking some inspiration from One Piece here so don't be shocked if things are a bit... ridiculous.

The stars in the night sky glittered above. Dancing with the light of the full moon. Warmly tucking the Land of Oz to sleep with a blanket of its luminous glow. While the sounds of nature sang a soft lullaby to the slumbering world.

Though, not everyone slumbered this night.

"Is that really how it works?" Cinder asked. She sounded unsure but she wrote it down regardless. The sound of her scribbling pen against the little notepad adding to the soft symphony of cackling flame, rustling leaves, and chirping crickets.

"Of course. Men are often quite simple. They don't really need much to be happy. Give a man good food and good sex and he'll be content."

The other women around her nodded in agreement. They sat huddled around the campfire wrapped up in blankets for extra protection against the night air. Most of the men and the other former

townspeople had long since fallen asleep. It had been hours since they started walking the villagers to a new settlement. With her and Jaune acting as their protection until they found a new home. During the trek Cinder had started up a conversation with some of the women from the village. She didn't want to get involved with them initially, but Jaune had encouraged her to open up a little.

The women in question were wives and mothers alike from the former town. Since she was about to get married and didn't have a clue what that was like or what she was about to do, she swallowed her pride and asked the resident married folk what their secret was. They exchanged information about how they maintained their relationships, and managed their homes etc.

Cinder was committed to learning as much as she could since she wanted the knowledge and experiences of functioning marriages. She took in and considered all of their advice. With a grain of salt of course. She wouldn't blindly believe everything she was told, but she would consider everything, nonetheless.

She had gotten all kinds of advice from everyone.

It seemed that while Men themselves were simple, relationships were anything but. Cinder flipped through her notes again committing everything to memory. The girls had lectured her at length about how accountability was very important and how they needed to take responsibility for their own behavior and not play the blame game. As well as the need for shared values, respect for one another, celebrating each other's success, open and honest conversations about sex, accepting each other's flaws, having rules for resolving conflict, knowing that they will both change but that didn't mean they had to grow apart only to adjust for those changes etc.

She nodded to herself after going over her list. A few of those she was lacking but she would consult Jaune on them later. His values were likely better than hers anyway.

" Is that all you wanted to know dear?"

She looked up at the kind older woman. Admittedly very beautiful for a woman in her 50s. Tulip she thought her name was. Cinder wasn't really listening when she said it. It's not like she would remember it anyway.

" I think so."

" You're not going to ask about children?"

" Children?" Cinder looked confused.

" What would I do with children?"

The women laughed.

" You raise them dear."

Cinder had no idea how to do that. The thought genuinely had never crossed her mind. She was already worried about handling a marriage but children?

" If you don't want children that's fine. It's not for everybody."

" It's not that I just... I never thought about it before..."

" Well, that man of yours certainly seems fit and virile. I doubt you could do it as much as you guys do and not get pregnant. It might be a conversation worth having eventually. Accidents do happen."

That certainly gave Cinder something to think about. The conversation around the campfire quickly devolved into mommy talk as Cinder soon drifted off into her own thoughts. She had never given it a thought before. The idea had been so alien to her she'd never even considered it a possibility. But at the rate her and Jaune were making love she could very well already be pregnant. Children of Cinder? She could scarcely even imagine it. What would that even look like? What kind of children would they be? What kind of

personality would they have? What kinds of things would they like? Would they be good or... like her?

She tried to imagine it. The hazy image of some faceless child appeared in her mind. Presumably a girl. Maybe she'd name it Ash? Or Burn? No actually, she wouldn't want them to have similar names to her. They shouldn't need to feel burdened by the legacy of their mother. A woman whose name evoked thoughts of dirt and destruction. Hers wasn't a name she wanted carried into the future.

The mothers were busy gushing about their children. How they had them, how cute they were and so on. But apparently it wasn't all fun and games.

" Children can be a handful though." One mother piped up.

" Of course." Another agreed.

Cinder was taken out of her thoughts by the sudden shift in conversation.

" You were all just saying how wonderful they were, now you're saying they're a handful? Which one is it?" Cinder asked.

" It's both dear. I love my babies to death but good lord at times you just want to throttle them."

The other woman nodded.

Cinder looked on, utterly baffled. The woman professed to want to strangle her children, but she said it with such... affection in her eyes. It was a bizarre contradiction. A living oxymoron.

" It's important to celebrate the joys and frustrations of being a mom. It's hard but it comes with a special kind of joy only mothers can know." One wife said.

Cinder let that thought marinate in her mind for a moment.

" So... say I were to become a... p... p-parent," she didn't know why she stuttered. Just saying the word aloud felt awkward for some reason. "What would I expect?"

" Ever heard of a job that requires no experience, gives no training, pays nothing, and you can't quit? That's motherhood. Oh, and people's lives are on the line. All the time."

" Surely it can't be that difficult."

" You better believe it sister. Children are harbingers of chaos. But don't worry. Most of your time will be spent telling children how many minutes they have left of playtime, and wandering from room to room putting away the same toys all day."

The girls shared a round of laughter at that. The other wives began to list off other things their children did.

Honestly? Most of it didn't sound too terrible. In fact, it sounded downright silly. Fun even. She'd get to be the boss. In charge and calling out orders just like she'd always dreamed. If that's all she had to deal with then she might actually be willing to try. What's the worst thing that could happen? Maybe being a mother wouldn't be so bad. How crazy could children be anyway?

After that the campfire was put out and the women said their goodnights. One by one they began to go back to their husband's tents and cuddled up for sleep. She went up to Jaune who was still keeping watch and gave him a kiss on the cheek before slipping into her own sleeping bag.

Cinder went to sleep that night with thoughts of motherhood and parenting with Jaune. Despite her many fears she was shocked to find there was only one question at the forefront of her mind. One worry that stood out above the rest. Thinking of her own childhood. Of a young girl dumped off at an orphanage, with not a single adult to love and care about her. Twice a slave and never finding

compassion let alone real love until she was a young adult. If it could happen to her it could happen to her own children.

If it came down to it... would she be able to protect them?

Cinder shot up from her bed with the sound of the alarm.

Heart pumping with the feeling of ever-present dread lodged in her chest.

Something was wrong.

Something was not as it should be.

Though she wasn't quite sure what. Everything in their room was as she left it. Her eyes swept across the room. Dresser was clear. Stack of books on her nightstand was untouched. Knitting material on her desk from her unfinished outfits was the same.

Turning over to look at the empty spot next to her, she realized that Jaune wasn't there. She frowned. Vaguely remembering him kissing her forehead before he went out to work. She had mistaken it for a dream in her drowsy state.

She looked down at her sleep attire. Still in her robes and underneath that, a practically see-through nightie, that was still a bit sticky from last night and her panties were missing. She and Jaune usually wore little clothing when they went to sleep. It made having sex easier. They used to sleep completely naked for exactly that reason. Then as the kids grew older that had to stop. Couldn't have them wandering into their room during a thunderstorm and wondering why mommy and daddy were "nakey".

Cinder glanced over at Nora's terrible excuse for a housewarming gift on the bedside table. The goofy looking rabbit shaped clock confirmed it was time to get out of bed. In fact, she had overslept. Which was... unusual. She knows she set the alarm properly.

However, she didn't have time to worry. She needed to prepare breakfast, wake up the boys and get them ready for training. She hopped out of bed and did her usual bathroom routine. After tidying up their bedroom a little she threw on some black leggings and one of Jaune's shirts, before slipping into her fuzzy slippers and heading out her room and into the hallway.

As she reached the boy's room at the end of the hall, just before the steps, she gently tapped on the door. "Boys? Time to get up." She didn't stop to hear a response as she continued down the stairs.

Cinder slid her hands along the familiar wooden railing as she descended. Feeling its smooth texture while glancing over the family photos on the wall as she moved past them.

The odd feeling of dread bubbled up again, but she pushed the thoughts out of her mind. Surely, she was just worrying about nothing. I mean waking up and randomly feeling as though something terrible had happened? Who does that? This is likely all in her head.

She was told quite often by her old therapist and other mothers alike that the fears were normal and that there was nothing wrong with having them, but she needed to remember that that's all they were. Silly worries. Her worries wouldn't always come true.

Sure, the boys would get in trouble a lot. Big deal. That didn't mean they were up to something every time she got a bad feeling. The last thing she wanted was to become one of those paranoid mothers who were always accusing her children of wrongdoing. Her little terrors would probably rampage through the town on a daily basis if she weren't there to keep an eye on them but not today. They were staying at home where they wouldn't get up to any sort of chicanery.

Cinder sighed. Closed her eyes and counted to ten to clear her head. Then continued heading back downstairs to prepare a small breakfast before their morning run. Deciding it was better to shift her

focus towards getting into teacher mode. Mentally recounting where her children were at in school.

Her eldest was doing fine in academics, however he was rapidly exceeding his brothers in terms of combat. It was starting to look like he needed more field experience rather than mere sparring. Which she had no doubt he would be excited about. Admittedly his hunger for violence was a bit concerning. She loved her boy, but he was starting to remind her a bit too much of her younger self. Too headstrong. Easily barrelled into things without caring about the risks and quick to anger.

She worried about adjusting their academic studies as well since the middle child had once again excelled ahead of his brothers. She thought about moving him ahead but having each of them be in three different places in teaching would be too confusing, so it'd probably be better to keep them all on the same page. Though she couldn't shake the feeling that she was holding him back. He was always the brightest of the three. Often too cautious for his own good, but held a lot of potential.

Her youngest was finally able to keep up with them in training now. Albeit just barely. She initially stressed heavily over his progress. He wasn't a skilled fighter nor was he the brightest of her hatchlings. He was kind & sweet. Much like she heard Jaune was in his youth. So, she thought he may not have been ready. Turns out she needn't have worried. As he proved more determined than either her or Jaune combined. However, she needed to set aside separate learning time so that she could catch him up to where his brothers were academically and physically. Maybe she could do more drills with him privately. Limit his playtime with his brothers a bit and maybe limit his food. He wouldn't like that, but he'd do it if his mama said so.

As she reached the bottom of the steps, she turned on her heels into the living room. Her fluffy mom slippers gliding against the smooth red oak floors.

Then turned into the kitchen and suddenly stopped. Listening to the silence of the household. Why was it quiet? They would normally be arguing with each other by now. The feeling of dread returned once more but she pushed it down. They were probably just oversleeping again. Nothing to get freaked out about. Worries were just worries.

That hope was swiftly crushed a moment later as she heard a crunch at her feet. Her foot came into contact with a broken piece of wood lying in the middle of the floor. A branch... A broken tree was brought into her home. Meaning this was brought from the wilderness... inside her home... where it was broken and left on the floor... Cinder squeezed her eyes shut and pinched the bridge of her nose while taking deep breaths. Allowing filth into her home was one of her peeves.

This would happen from time to time, she knew. The boys would bring in some absurd object from the forest or the town and just leave it lying about. It drove her up the wall to no end.

After one last exasperated exhale, she picked up the stick and walked over to the kitchen window located above the sink. Opening it up as she promptly threw it outside. Then went back over to the mess to clean up the broken bits and threw them in the trash. The boys were certainly going to get a talking to about that as soon as they came downstairs.

Cinder had multiple years in therapy after being freed from servitude to the Dark Queen. She liked to think she had mastered her rage. It was moments like this where that notion was thrown out the window and blasted to pieces with a rocket launcher.

After she put the broom away, she inhaled deeply and channeled the rage held by all mothers of disobedient children everywhere before shouting at the top of her lungs.

"BOYS!"

Every wild animal within 100 miles whimpered at her mighty roar. The very house itself jumped in fright, while every denizen of Oz within earshot flinched and looked over their shoulders for their own mothers.

Yet for her own boys... there was silence. No shuffling of feet nor footsteps in a hurry to get downstairs and heed her call. Nothing.

Her anger subsided and the feeling of dread returned in full. She had already called them down once before. There was no reason for them to be this quiet.

She immediately turned off the stove and stormed back up the stairs to the boy's room. Her oldest was responsible for this. Some kind of prank, she was sure.

"Boys." she started. Reaching the top of the steps, "It's almost time for our run, why aren't you getting-" she grabbed the doorknob nearly tearing it from its socket and flung the door open, "ready...?"

Once again, the not so young mother was at a loss for words and stared slack jawed at her children's room.

Beds empty and unmade. Room an absolute mess.

Her little ones were nowhere to be seen.

Outside the walls of the town, the coast of Phoenix Island was quiet as usual this time of day. The summer season had accompanied with it a lush green landscape. The new bloomage cascaded the flora in a wide array of colors. Like a painter had taken his brush dabbed in various, blue, reds, and lavender, paints and flung them across the canvas. Nearby, the waves gently lapped at the edge of the beach. Nervously tasting it's salty shores. The sound of rolling waves and the occasional splash echoed through the fresh morning air. A few feet away from the crescent bay, on higher ground, the forest

overlooked the ocean. While concealing from the eyes of the town guard, the small group of people, hidden amongst the thicket.

The eldest of the three found the scene rather relaxing. Hands crossed over his red shirt, black hair swayed in the breeze whilst his baby blue eyes scanned the new flora. He honestly couldn't fathom why his brother was so stressed. All things considered the situation was more or less resolved. His little brother was such a worry wart. Honestly, he was starting to act like their mother.

The middle brother walked to and fro along the coast in a frantic manner. Grass crushed underfoot, blue jacket flapping behind him as he did so. He ran his hands through his blonde hair like a mad man. Pacing in circles as he muttered to himself. Wondering how their brother had screwed them all over this time. Wondering how the hell he allowed this to happen.

The youngest brother was under no such stress. In fact, he was by far the least bothered by the situation. He also circled the scene. Though whilst riding on the back of a large bear cub. The sun reflected off his bright yellow shirt while his short black hair blew in the breeze. His special hat, made of straw, hung around his neck, bounced along his back as the beast bound across the open field chasing a butterfly. Not a care in the world. The missed breakfast he'd been complaining about earlier long forgotten about. Too busy pretending to be a warrior of some kind. Or maybe a pirate.

Wasn't much time to think about that now though.

The current situation was much more dire.

"We are so screwed!"

The older brother let out an exhausted sigh.

"You said that already. I'm not sure what you even mean. We handled that pretty easily."

"Dumbass! Have you even thought about how we're going to dispose of them?"

"Oh..."

" *Oh* ?! That's all you have to say!? Take responsibility for your actions!"

"You know we really don't appreciate being talked about like we're a bunch of trash."

The bandits spoke up.

They were already feeling rather demoralized from having been defeated by children. Being treated like a side-issue was just rubbing salt in the wound.

"Shut up trash! You're the reason we're in this mess!" said the middle brother. Pointing an accusing finger at the criminals.

Next to the 3 children was a large pile of neatly tied up bruised, beaten-up bodies. Belonging to the hired guns sent to explore this place. Though judging by the results, they were quite terrible at their job.

"Uhhh this is so bad. We're gonna get in so much trouble. If we had just asked the town guard to deal with them in the first place none of this would have happened!"

"Yeah, but we wouldn't have gotten our hands on their loot. They would've confiscated it." He patted the bag of money and gear.

"The money is one thing, but we can't do anything with this other stuff! It's Rain Dust! We can't use this here, it's illegal. Dad would throw a fit if he caught us with this."

He hated to admit it, but his brother had a point. Rain Dust had the power to create rain by simply burning it. It was in high demand for settlements all over Oz now that people needed their crops to grow.

In a time where everyone was trying to rebuild it was a pretty big deal. Only problem was that using it stole rain clouds from somewhere else. Meaning that while one place got plenty of rain another would experience a drought. It was a poorly made product. Artificial dust created by mixing dust types. The chemical composition was all wrong. Which gave it an absolutely rancid smell. They couldn't allow that stuff to stay in the town. Since it might attract too much attention if the wrong people thought they were hoarding it or something.

"They don't even have any old world tech!"

"True, but they've also got guns and some other junk."

"We can't use that!"

"Hm. Well there's only one thing we can do... we gotta kill em."

"What!?" His brother yelled.

"WHAT!?" The crook's eyes bugged out of their heads like an old cartoon.

When they got hired for this, they were told the wildlife here might be dangerous but thought that was in reference to the animals that lived here. They were wrong.

"What? I mean there's no other choice, right? If we get caught, we get in trouble. Might as well off em here."

"Fine."

"YOU'RE JUST GOING TO AGREE WITH HIM?" They were really starting to regret coming to this island.

"Well, that settles it. Here, take this gun."

"YOU WANT ME TO DO IT!?"

The older brother merely shrugged.

"Well, I've never killed anyone before." he said.

"Neither have I, you idiot!"

"Hey guys!"

Their youngest brother came in between them. Still riding a bear for whatever reason.

"What's with the bear?"

"He was locked up way in back on their ship. He seems big but he's really just a baby. Anyways he says he needs to find his mom so let's take him home till we find her!"

"NO." Accompanying that instant rejection was a whack upside the head with a metal pipe. Causing it to squeak like a rubber toy.

"Aw." He pouted as he rubbed his head.

"Forget the bear! We gotta find a way to get rid of these guys. Mom's probably woken up by now. We took WAY too long to-"

Suddenly, a tremor shook the ground. Then another. Then a third. Then a fourth, followed by a roar so loud it rattled their ear drums and caused the birds and nearby animals in the forest to scatter in fear.

Cinder paced back and forth throughout the room frantically.

The boys never left the house early. They weren't allowed. The only time they left the house early was when they would come jogging with her along the mountain trail as they did every morning. That hadn't happened yet however, as she'd yet to feed them breakfast. They had no reason to leave. Even when the boys would go play in

the mountains in the evenings, they always always made sure to tell mommy when they were leaving.

Could someone have broken in? Kidnapped them? No. Impossible. Her & Jaune had keen senses and would've had no trouble detecting an intruder with hostile intentions before they even reached the house. During their travels their desire to protect their children had caused them to refine their sensory abilities with aura to detect even the slightest amount of danger. It's what kept them and her oldest alive during their journey through the wilderness. If there was a threat, she would have sensed it immediately.

Yet her sons were not here. Could she have grown too comfortable and let her guard down?

She tried extending her senses outward and could not feel the boys anywhere near the house.

Theres... there's no way they left willingly... right?

Just as Cinder was feeling terrible and that she'd failed as a mother, a tremor was felt. It was powerful. A dull distant thud on the peripheral of her senses. Like a giant was throwing a stomping tantrum.

Cinder immediately turned towards the direction of the town, and she finally felt them. Their presence was more easily sensed when they were under immediate threat. Strong emotion was when aura shined the brightest. In that moment, she felt their fear wash over her like cold water.

Cinder's heart began to beat faster and what was once rage soon began to be filled with another emotion. Worry. Followed quickly by fear.

How could this have happened?

Three children laid on their backs in the grass as they stared up at the night sky. Utterly awestruck as they gazed up at the jaw-droppingly beautiful skies above. Experiencing the full brilliance of a starry night. Observing the half-moon in all its splendor. Not obscured by the light pollution of the larger cities. Their bodies were worn. Matted with sweat, dirt, and exhaustion from the day's earlier training and their recent outdoor games.

They were at a bit of a loss for what to do next.

Their dad had come home and given them a look. Letting them know he needed some alone time with their mother. They knew what that meant. Well two of them did. The smallest just thought mom & dad were exercising. It was understandable though. Dad had to travel to the Emerald City to do a job for that Prince Oscar guy. So, he wanted to spend as much time with their mom as possible.

So, the brothers three took the hint and had found themselves on the outskirts of town. They'd avoided the guards altogether by taking the long way around through the forest outside their home. They had fun outside the main entrance. Playing every manner of imaginative childish game, you could come up with to pass the time. Having already fought wild animals, and played pirates. Now they were bored and struggling to come up with something fun to do.

They prayed for something interesting to happen.

It seemed their prayers were answered when a strange boat arrived on the shore of the island. The boys all looked at each other but it was the firstborn who got curious and rushed over to investigate before the others could stop him. They stopped in the bushes by shore, close but hidden out of site as they observed the new visitors.

They looked ordinary enough. Until the middle child noticed the guns, nets and tranquilizers. To which he promptly told the other two.

" What do you think they want?" the youngest asked curiously.

" Judging by their equipment I'd say they're poachers."

" Poachers?"

" It means they steal animals." The second born spat with disgust.

" Oh."

" I'd say these guys are pretty dumb regardless," The eldest spoke. "Don't they know how strong the animals on this island are? The animals here can all use aura and are way stronger than the average grimm. A couple of guns isn't gonna put them down. I'm not sensing any aura from these guys. There's not that many of them either. Do they really think that's gonna be enough to take one of these animals down?"

It was true. The brothers themselves had battled plenty of the wild animals in the forest but they had the benefit of having their aura unlocked from a young age. And even then, there were well over hundreds of creatures that even they couldn't beat.

" They must not know much about this place. Likely somebody with a lot of money who wants to scout this island for resources. They probably don't even know we've settled here."

" We should go tell dad." the youngest spoke up.

The middle child agreed.

" Right. It's better to let dad or town guard deal with this. Let's-"

Just as the younger brothers had begun to turn home and warn their parents about what was going on.

The eldest, as foolhardy and as reckless as ever, had leapt out of the bushes and out into the open.

Leaving the other two to stare dumbfounded as he greeted the suspected criminals.

" Hey there! How's it going?"

He saw one crook reach for his gun but then quickly put his hand away when he saw it was a child.

The oldest brother merely rolled his eyes and continued his rant as his brothers came out of the bushes and filed in next to him.

" So, what brings you to this island? We don't get many visitors."

" Uh... hey there kiddo." one of the men stepped forward. A crooked looking fellow with slicked back hair, wide jaw, and a pencil thin handlebar mustache that curled on each side of his face. Everything from his posture to his mannerisms just oozes pompous scumbag. "I'm in charge here. Forgive the intrusion little ones, but we didn't know people lived here. We're explorers you see. Just here to go sightseeing. Could you tell us the name of this place?"

Every word of his dripped with false sincerity but the child paid it no heed and spoke confidently.

" Well sure." The boy smiled. "This is Phoenix Island. Home to people looking to start a new life after the old world died. A place of rebirth if you will. That's our town over there. It's ruled over by a powerful King."

He gestured to the large stone wall encompassing their home.

" His name is Jaune Arc, and he isn't too fond of strangers." Not true, but not entirely false either. The mayor was technically Mr. Pewter, but the truth was everyone looked to their dad like he was in-charge anyway. Mr Pewter may have helped build that wall, but it was only with their dad's help that it was possible. Whereas their father was the reason people felt it safe to settle here in the first place. He was the one who protected them from danger.

Gasps rang around the crowd.

hadn't noticed them from this distance but if they got any closer, they would definitely be spotted. Kidnapping these kids was not an option. Regardless of whether the child's words were true or not, they weren't here to start a fight with an entirely unknown civilization. And if they were the children of Jaune Arc... well they certainly wouldn't want to find out what would happen if they tried anything.

" Our dad wouldn't just let tourists go off into the forests alone. Wouldn't it be more reasonable to have some help from the locals rather than going off aimlessly on your own?"

They all nodded in agreement.

" T-That sounds reasonable." The leader piped up from his hiding place behind a boulder. "My name is Clayton," he said, sounding more confident now.

" By the way, we never got your names."

The brothers all looked at each other. The youngest looked curious while the second born looked pensive.

" Ah. I guess we didn't introduce ourselves."

The oldest pointed a thumb at himself "My name's Ace. I'm the oldest." Then turning to his right and pointing at the younger sibling in the blue shirt who was looking nervous and unsure of the whole situation. "This here is my younger brother Jack. And this," he patted the hat of his smallest sibling "is our youngest brother, King." The lad in question raising his hand to enthusiastically wave hello.

" Pretty easy to remember right?"

Jack grabbed his older brother by the collar.

" What the heck are you doing?" He whispered.

" Giving them an objective. What's it look like?"

"It looks like you just gave our actual names to some mustache twirling crook." he hushed exasperatedly.

" Stop exaggerating."

Jack gave his brother a flat stare and gestured for him to turn around.

Ace looked back to see the man, Clayton, was indeed looking off into the distance whilst twirling his mustache and snickering to himself as if some grand scheme of his was coming together. Then immediately put his hands away upon being noticed.

" Oh." Ace wanted to facepalm himself. This guy was terrible.

" I-Is there a problem?" one nervous guy from behind a boulder spoke.

" No, not at all. My brother here is just worried you guys might get killed out here. It's all good though. We'll tell the old man you're cool and just want to explore. Meet us here again in the morning and we'll bring you a map of the island so you don't get lost. Sound good?"

After the children left the poachers breathed a sigh of relief. That was tense as hell. They were just a bunch of homeless bums looking for a quick buck. They were not equipped to deal with ex-Huntsmen.

" No conflict AND we get a map? This is gonna be easier than we thought." One joked.

The entire group shared a round of laughter at that. Their boss had different thoughts however.

" Fools!" Clayton raised his voice then immediately clamped his hands over his mouth. Suddenly careful of his volume before speaking again. He turned to his men.

" You actually believe those brats were here to help us? It's a trap by Jaune Arc!" Clayton waved his arms around for emphasis.

" Are... are you sure boss?"

" Of course. How many small children do you know who would walk up to armed strangers that calmly? The only reason they would do so is if they'd done it many times before."

The group of poachers began to grow nervous once more. As their boss spoke like he was telling a spooky story to a bunch of children. Using a flashlight to cast shadows over his face. Because.

" Just think about it you fools. A mysterious island in the middle of nowhere. Run by the heretic himself, where innocent children casually approach strangers, and invite them to a meeting? Doesn't that sound suspicious?"

It did. All at once the immense fear began to sink in again.

" He's gonna kill us."

" Of course he is you idiots. That's why we have to jump him first. We can't go back empty handed so we must take what we can. Let's head into the forest and grab whatever beast we can find."

The whole crew nodded in agreement. For a moment. Until one spoke up.

" What if they weren't though?" Silence once again cut through the group.

" What?" Clayton looked at him like he was an idiot.

" What if the kids weren't lying?"

" Don't be stupid. What other motive could they possibly have?"

The boys made it home and found both their parents huddled on the couch in their robes. They'd finished with their "activities" and fallen asleep reading one of their mother's books. Cinder in Jaune's lap, snug in their father's arms. Lightly snoring into her husband's neck like a baby. The boys crept past them and went to go bathe but not before sneaking into their parents room and resetting their mother's alarm.

Then after finishing whatever dinner was laid out for them, the brothers three huddled in their room. Under the blankets for extra secrecy and a flashlight to cast shadows over their faces. Because.

" Why?!" Jack shout whispered. Grabbing the flashlight and shining it over his own face for emphasis.

Ace grabbed the flashlight back and did the same.

" Relax, will you? Besides, I've got a perfectly good reason."

His brothers looked at him expectantly.

" They're outsiders right? Which means they have tons of stuff from the continent that people on this island don't got."

Jack wanted to facepalm himself as he could see where Ace was going with this.

" My last scam didn't make us any money but this time we can sell all kinds of stuff the town's never seen before. Old world tech, money, jewels. These guys probably have it all."

Jack grabbed the flashlight back.

" But you don't know that! Why didn't you just rob them then and there if that's what you wanted!?"

Ace snatched the flashlight again.

" Duh dummy. The guards would've heard if we took them out right there. But you know there's a moment where they change shifts early in the morning. That's when we can get them."

King stretched his arm and took the flashlight out of his brother's hand.

" Will we still get to eat breakfast?"

Ace smirked confidently.

" Of course."

" Ok. I'm in."

Jack could only facepalm himself again as he was dragged into the madness. The least he could do was try to make sure they didn't get into too much trouble.

The children very quickly realized that the tremors weren't an earthquake. They could hear the collapse of trees as a shadowy mass emerged from the forest. It was a bear. A massive one. Not as big as Rock Jaw from the mountains but still pretty damn big regardless. It walked upright on its hind legs like a person. Damn near two stories high. The thing looked vicious. A massive scar over its left eye signifying it'd been through hell and back. It was a solid mass of dark brown fur that was rough and matted with dried blood. Looking like it had trekked through mud and had become caked in dried concrete, but the sunlight made it look like iron. Blood red circle shone on its head. Its fur did little to hide the solid muscle that adorned its flesh. Its shoulders were sheer boulders of muscle. If it struck a house, they were certain it would bowl over. The ground gave way as it stepped and the boys backed up as it approached.

No doubt this was the bear cub's mother that'd come looking for her child.

The boys didn't even have time to hear the girlish scream let out by the poachers.

The angry mum roared and the boys had to cover their ears. It was so loud. But that didn't stop its hyper voice from knocking them off their feet and sending them back spiraling into the dirt. Their aura took the brunt of the blast but despite that the boys tumbled around in the dirt before finally finding their feet again. The town probably heard that incredible shout. If it were any closer it might've even cracked the town wall. Each of them picked themselves out of the dirt. Ears and cranium throbbing.

Suddenly Jack remembered where he had seen the bear before.

"Guys, this is a Blood Moon Bear." he said, wiping the dirt from his brow. His brothers didn't recognize it but it was one of the creatures their mother had shown them in Oz's bestiary.

"Also known as the "Blood Moon Beast", he started. Recalling the paragraph from memory. "Taller and bulkier than regular bears. Its hands, legs, chest, back, and the left half of its face are covered in gray mud that is as hard as iron. Can unleash the full brunt of its aura from the red moon mark on its forehead. Known to fly into a rage if anything threatens its young-"

"Scatter!" Ace interrupted.

No time for a Zoology lesson.

Mama bear brought its large paw up way over their heads and swung it down with alarming strength that shook the ground. The three of them swiftly dodged spearing out in multiple directions. Just as their father had taught them when facing a larger opponent. Don't stay in one place. Always keep moving. Stay out of range. The beast followed, rushing them down. Attacking the nearest child. Clawing, scraping, and swiping at whatever got close. Cutting vicious wide sweeps into the landscape. Kicking up large plumes of dust.

Using the cover of the dust clouds to his advantage, Ace was the first to leap towards the beast. Hopping onto its arm, running up its length, then jumping towards the face. He charged up his semblance, feeling the immense heat enter his fist. It glowed right orange as he brought it down onto the creature's face. Resulting in a power packed explosion that rocked its head back. Nearly causing her to stumble. When the smoke dispersed however, the bear mom was undamaged. She merely shook off the shock. Her aura took the blast with relative ease and turned to chomp back at Ace who was falling in mid air, with jaws that could crush a house.

She might've got him too, if Jack didn't toss his pipe fully imbued with his aura at mama bear's neck. Her aura took the blow again but she could still feel the force in her neck as it pinged off her and she roared in discomfort. Giving Ace enough time to fire up his ability again. His semblance heating up the air to cause another explosion that sent him rocketing towards the ground and away from the roaring mother. Lucky for him, King saw his trajectory and rolled to the spot where he was. Using his semblance, the youngest brother inflated himself to the size of an extra large balloon and caught his brother's fall. Causing him to bounce off his belly and land on his feet. As much as Ace liked to make fun of him for having such a lame ability, he couldn't be more grateful that his brother was made of rubber. Aura or not, hitting the ground head first would've hurt.

He looked over to see Jack dodging as swiftly as ever. Avoiding every swipe and wide lunge mama bear threw his way. Until he didn't. He caught a claw to the knee that sent him careening across the bush. Nearly crashing into another tree. Ace, and King immediately sprang up and dashed to his aid. They had fought plenty of wild beasts out here on the island but it seemed this was one out of their league. The brothers surrounded their sibling and brought him to his feet. Mother bear had apparently had enough playing around and was done trying to swat insects and choosing instead to obliterate them.

The red circle on her forehead glowed dangerously as the beast began to focus her aura. Forming a bright red sphere reminiscent of a full moon that was red as blood. Jack had only read about the attack in books and had never seen it before but apparently it was capable of punching a hole into a mountain, which was how they made their caves. There was no way they could take that. Momentarily paralyzed under the bright red glow, the trio looked up at certain doom.

They could not beat this thing.

As Jack recalled the rest of the bestiary entry. He remembered that the female becomes the strongest of its species when it was defending its children.

What hope did they have against that?

Just then, a deafening screech ripped through the air like the sound of an angry hawk. The boys barely had time to notice it as a bright blue streak blitzed through the sky at absurd speed. The beast was struck with a kick that sent it reeling backwards to the floor and taking out all of its aura in one hit. The force creating a maelstrom of blue and gold blaze from the impact that temporarily brightened the area. The beam never fired. It certainly wouldn't be making another one anytime soon.

The boys looked up to see a figure they knew all too well. The Arc Matriarch standing in the midst of the cascading feathers. They excitedly called out to her but she raised a hand to tell them to stay where they were.

The beast was getting up again. Cinder allowed it to rise to its feet. It stood on all-fours and it stared at her. Angry but wary of this sudden new threat.

Cinder merely stared back. Daring it to make another move. They stayed like that for what seemed an eternity but their staring contest was soon broken with the sound of much smaller infantile roars.

It was its two other bear cubs that came tumbling out of the forest. Soon the third, the youngest cub came out from the bushes it was hiding in to join its siblings.

Though not before King left the company of his brothers. Calling for the bear cub to wait as he ran up to it. It did. Both Cinder and the mother bear were at a loss for words now as they were suddenly made to bear witness to a human child and a bear cub sharing a deep hug. The boy and the large fluff ball hugged each other back like they were going to miss each other forever. It was a strange but tearful send off that left Cinder torn between her rage, utter confusion, and the desperate urge to pretend it wasn't cute. Then they separated. The cub ran back to the others, and the boy waved to his bear friend one more time. And it waved back.

Cinder and the bear mom shared a look and for a moment. As if both looking at each other for an answer for what the hell just happened. Neither had one.

Instead the bear turned from her, took her cubs and went back into the forest.

"Mom!" Her other two children ran over to her. "That was amazing! way to beat th-"

Cinder whirled on them with a fierce glare. Silencing them immediately.

"Oh right. We're in trouble."

The poachers tried to escape during the fight but failed miserably. Every single one of them was still tied up and injured by the time the guards arrived. They were held captive until their father came back. Which was early. The poachers informed him of what his kids did and swore they'd never come back to this island again. He assured them they wouldn't. Because he tied them up even worse than before and sent them adrift on a raft out at sea.

At least they didn't have to go through the hassle of arresting the poachers. That would have been annoying. They hadn't gotten away with the Rain Dust. Which was good. None of them managed to get any old world tech though. That was bad. Or maybe not? The mayor probably just dumped all their loot into storage. They'd only need to go ask in order to confirm. So it wasn't a total loss. Only problem was being allowed to get out of the house for the next 10 years. That might be a little difficult.

"Why is she so mad?"

"Ace. Shut up."

"What? What did I do?"

"Are you *serious* ?"

"I'm just saying. It's not like this is the worst thing we've ever done."

"My arms *huuuurrrt* ."

"Boys! No talking!"

Cinder was currently seated on the couch working on one of her books while she waited for Jaune to return. Her back was turned to them while the boys currently stood opposite her, facing the wall. Just because she couldn't see them didn't mean she was deaf.

As soon as they got home Cinder made them clean the house until their arms were utterly exhausted. Which is why their mother then decided to make them hold up the very buckets of soap and water they used. So here they were. All 3 of them stood in a T pose with their arms fully extended and a bucket in each arm. They'd been holding them for the past 2 hours.

Ace lowered his voice.

"Look on the bright side. It's not like we missed out on anything. This just means we got an excuse to sneak into the mayor's office next

time. How cool is that?"

Not very cool apparently as a bucket came flying at his head. Knocking him over and dunking him in dirty soap water.

"I didn't get to eat breakfast!"

King leaped from his position and bit his older brother in the arm.

Jack dropped his buckets in an attempt to stop Ace from using his semblance.

Cinder got up from the couch and attempted to pull all three of them apart.

By now the buckets they were carrying were thrown across the room. Making a mess of the house all over again.

Just then, the front door opened and an exhausted Jaune stepped into the house with a sigh.

"Sorry I'm late guys, the mayor wanted to-"

His sentence cut off as he realized his words fell in deaf ears. His family were all screaming. His wife was trying to yank the boys apart but his youngest merely stretched and kept a firm arm attached to his older brother as he attempted to punch him. While the middle child tried to prevent his brother's semblance from going off in the house.

Jaune looked up to the heavens and sighed deeply. Silently asking the gods if they loved messing with him.

"Managed to solve one problem today." He turned back to his family. "Not sure what to do about this one..."

"Jaune! Don't just stand there and gawk. Help me pull him off. Young man, release your brother this instant!"

"Not until he gives me back breakfast!"

"You can have a knuckle sandwich instead!" His fist began to light up.

"Ace, don't fire that in the house!"

Jaune could only sigh as he walked over to help manage the madness. Despite it all he couldn't help the smile on his face.

Well. At least the kids were safe.

I utterly failed with the word count again. I might as well give up and expect every chapter to hit 9k. Lol.

Jaune has a pretty terrible reputation after saving Cinder. He's no longer a Huntsman either. I'll get into that more later.

As some of you may have noticed I'm taking some liberties with Aura here. The show doesn't really explore the ability much so I'll be expanding on it and playing with it as much as I can. Aura sensing is a canon ability that you don't see characters utilize often. It can surprisingly do a lot but here just know I'll be writing it to be more like Observation Haki. Might even throw in some stuff from Nen or The Force.

In regards to the kids: I took advantage of the fact that not every first name in RWBY has to be a color. They're admittedly very simplistic but everyone always comes up with the same stuff when thinking about Cinder's children. They go for the low hanging fruit of *Insert random girl(s) named after something fire related* etc. Bonus points if she's named after Amber. I found it boring as hell. The worst is when people DO write children but they're typically written as nothing more than cute things that exist to be cute without an actual character. And they're almost always relegated to epilogues. It's tiresome seeing the same thing over and over. So for me this is a breath

of fresh air. I had to do something different. There's no way I would be able to write this if that's all they were. The names aren't the most creative thing in the world but they're short, simple, and easy to remember. Which is all they really need to be for this story. However, the names also reflect their characters in ways you'll see later.

As for why I chose the number: Cinder & Jaune are basically Salem & Oz just in reverse. Going from lovers to enemies and enemies to lovers. They're the opposite reflection. Since Knightfall is the reverse of Oz & Salem's tale, one of my goals is to mirror them while breaking old patterns. So I decided to contrast Ozlem by giving them 3 boys instead of 4 girls.

That and I figured using familiar characters as a basis would make it feel more enjoyable. That way it almost feels sort of like a soft crossover.

It should be very obvious who these 3 characters are based on and there's a very good reason why I picked them.

To be clear, I didn't just choose those 3 characters as the basis for their children simply because I liked them or thought it was cool. There are some very important thematic & character reasons why these 3 were picked. If you're at all familiar with their stories it shouldn't be a mystery at all as to why they would have relevance to Cinder; an enslaved orphan who never had a family, and who had her freedom stolen by a corrupt government. As such I realized they would make the perfect reflections of Cinder's character. So each of them are going to be used to flesh out Cinder as well as test/show her growth.

Chapter 3

There was a lot to juggle with the worldbuilding and the character arcs in this one. I'm always wondering how much of the world to showcase in a given chapter. Which parts of it would be the most interesting for the chapter? Which parts do I want to show? Am I hinting at too much too soon? things like that. There's all these ideas and I gotta pick just the right ones to fit in the chapter. So I end up constantly tweaking things to make sure they make sense with future chapters. It's tough but I still enjoy it. Though I worry this chapter won't be as fun as others.

In any case, here is a glimpse into what a semi-typical day in the Arc Family looks like.

It was getting late. The sky was a spill of molten gold. The sun was beginning to kiss the horizon as they got ready to lay down together. The day dissolving into a soft, dreamy twilight as it slowly prepared for the night.

The breeze whipped at her face as Cinder attempted to turn the page of her novel. Interrupting her and making her lose her place. Unleashing a frustrated sigh, she looked up from the park bench.

Checking on her kids again for the umpteenth time.

The park was one of newer additions to the island. More than half-way down the path, through the lush forest, which connected the town with their house, a new path skewed off to the side led into a vast open field where Jaune & Cinder had cut down the trees to make their home. About 3 years ago during a town hall meeting, various parents complained about not having anywhere to send their restless children during the day. They needed room to play. So Jaune with the help of the local dads built various playground areas

for them. This being the biggest one. Thus, the children played protected by a solid wall of stone courtesy of the mayor's semblance.

Watching children play was in itself a relatively new experience for Cinder. As a child she was merely bullied and beaten up by older kids whenever the opportunity had arisen. So, watching her *own* children play so happily with other kids? No matter how many times she'd seen it, it was all still difficult to believe.

Her young sons. Her boys. *She* made those. They came from her. Now they were alive. Running around. Happy. Because of her.

It was simply surreal to her.

Cinder for as long as she remembered, always sought after the power to destroy.

Instead, she created life. She. Cinder. Created *Life* .

They said she'd never do anything special. Yet she brought whole existences into the world. Despite once wielding magic itself somehow *this* felt more unbelievable.

On some days, in quiet moments like these... it almost made her feel like a God.

Cinder shook away such silly thoughts. Smiling as she ran her hand up her left arm. It was a brief reminder of the devil she almost fully became. It was flesh now that her semblance had restored it along with her fully functioning eye.

The scars still remained as a reminder of her past mistakes but despite that she felt whole. She felt human.

And as she watched her youngest son tumble in the dirt, then get back up and wave at her with his big grin... she felt loved.

She waved back and observed him as he chased down the ball and the other kids once more.

"Did you see it? the deity?"

For a second, she thought the comment was directed at her but when she turned to the other end of the bench she could see otherwise. To the left of her sat two women. A short-haired brunette that looked to be in her early twenties and another much older, darker haired woman, sat next to each other chatting. They spoke in hushed tones so as not to disturb the woman they thought was reading. Cinder was so engrossed in her own thoughts that she had completely forgotten that they were here. She vaguely recalled them bowing to her when they first sat down. She might've seen them around before but she didn't fraternize with the townspeople enough to recognize them.

"No, I didn't get to see it," The younger woman responded. "But I heard other people saw it. This island is indeed blessed. When we first came here, I remember being hesitant about moving so far from the protection of the maidens. I'm glad that we needn't have worried. Not only do we have Lord Jaune, but the deity protects us as well."

The darker haired woman nodded in agreement.

"I witnessed it with my own eyes. I almost dropped to my knees and wept. I pray the great goddess looks after our children."

Cinder's brow furrowed as she listened.

Deity? Prayer? What were they talking about? Jaune hadn't mentioned this. Did these people form their own religion of some kind? When did that happen? They hadn't been on the island for much more than a decade. Was it some older religion that they brought over from the mainland, or did they start it here?

Maybe there was no point in fussing over it. Such things ought to be expected. Human beings were naturally religious creatures after all. Take away their gods or whatever it is they put on a pedestal and sooner or later they'd just worship something else. There was

nothing she could do about that. Not that it was any of her business anyway.

Though she didn't want one of these women to become disillusioned with their faith and end up depressed should one of their children become injured or killed. She didn't know if whatever god they prayed to could even hear them, so she'd better keep an eye on all the brats on this island herself, just to be on the safe side. Having the people in good spirits meant less problems for her.

The two women's chatter continued while Cinder watched her sons run across the field. Having decided there was no point in continuing to read since their playtime was almost up. The former villainess watched as her oldest son, Ace ran over the bases at utterly unfair speed causing the other kids to throw up their arms in exasperation. She could see Jack with his hand over his face shaking his head and felt herself wanting to do the same. Her second born had a way of personifying her emotions without intending to. When it was time for them to switch, her oldest was pitching now and her youngest was batting. This couldn't be good.

Just as she was fretting over the outcome of this game the women's conversation resumed in her ear.

"So have your kids asked you to go to Thriller Bark in the Grimmlands?"

Cinder almost flinched as she watched King miss a swing. The force causing him to spin like a top making him dizzy. His eyes turning into swirls as the kids laughed their heads off.

"Oh, you *know* they did. It's all the kids can talk about. '*Mommy I want to see the Grimm, Mommy I want to ride the Grimm*'. Thats all I've heard for the past week. Hell, I hear the whole island is talking about it. They're so desperate to meet the Queen too. Not that I blame them. Most people don't get to see her in person."

Cinder's eye twitched upon hearing that. She had almost forgotten there was a special event being hosted in the Grimmlands. The very thought of it made her uncomfortable for many reasons. Luckily her own children hadn't asked her to go. She was certainly in no mood to see that woman again.

Cinder felt her teeth clench while watching King miss the second strike. This time the speed of the ball was enough to knock the bat from his little hands. Then watched as he comically screamed and stomped his foot in an adorable tantrum whilst shouting at his older brother for throwing the ball too hard. While the latter only threw on a smug grin and mocked him for being weak.

Cinder couldn't help but pinch the bridge of her nose in frustration.

Ace geared up for another pitch just as the conversation began to shift.

"Childhood is so precious, isn't it? They're so innocent now but eventually it all goes away later."

"It's like what happened to Malay. Apparently, her adult son stopped talking to her entirely. Just ghosted his own mother can you believe it? I hear the poor woman can't even eat and cries herself to sleep constantly. It's gut wrenching."

The short-haired woman nodded as she adjusted the baby on her bosom.

"Estrangement isn't a new thing. Sometimes when they grow older, they cut off their moms entirely. You don't even know what you did wrong and one day it's like they just stop loving you. Cut you off without a word. It's a terrifying thing. I don't want to imagine my kids doing that."

"I hear it starts when they're young," The other mother continued. "First they stop doing things you used to do together then it's all downhill from there."

Cinder's eyes drifted downward.

She wasn't a part of the conversation though she couldn't help but admit the thought was chilling. She didn't know it had an official descriptor, but she had always anticipated this estrangement from her own children at some point.

Truth be told, she had long since made peace with such a notion. She had always assumed that her children would one day learn the truth about who she used to be and choose to abandon her. It was to be expected but thankfully far in the future. So, she at least got to enjoy them while they still loved her.

A sudden loud thwack caused Cinder to look up. King had hit the flaming ball across the field. Much to the shock of the other kids. No one could get to it in time as he ran around the bases. Seemed like the perfect spot to end today's playtime.

As if right on schedule, she felt Jaune's aura tug on her own through their connection. Meaning it was time to eat. Cinder stood up, dusting off her dress, and decided it was time to head home. She called the boys in.

The youngest Arc sibling watched his older brothers leave the field and rush over to where their mother was. King was especially excited at having got one over on Ace today and planned to rub it in later.

Though as he picked up his hat to leave one of the other kids stopped him.

"Nice job out there joyboy."

"Thanks. I gotta go now. My mamma's calling!"

"Why do you sound so excited for that? Usually when your mom calls it means you're in trouble."

"Cuz, I get to hold her hand and tell her about the stuff I did today!"

The other kids looked at each other and snickered.

"Hey hang on a sec."

The other two women had gotten up and gone over to collect their own children in preparation to leave but their conversation still lightly echoed in Cinder's ears.

She congratulated her oldest two boys on their game as well as gave Ace a mild lecture about going easy on his younger brother. After which they both raced off ahead of her hoping to beat the other home to prove who was the fastest. It was one of those things that made her roll her eyes but smile, nonetheless. Moments like these were a reminder to simply enjoy their youth. Yes, it was true that one day her boys may stop loving her but that was years from now. Something she wouldn't have to worry about for decades. Which is why she chose to enjoy small moments like this.

King ran up to her. Greeting her happily as usual telling her about his game, asking if she saw him hit the home run. Which she did. Proudly patting him on the head as she told him so.

Yet for some reason he began to look a little downcast.

Cinder extended her hand. He reached out with his. As per their ritual, she would enjoy walking home holding hands with her youngest while he prattled on about-

"Actually, mom... I'm gonna go catch up with Ace n' Jack."

Wait what?

Her boy nervously retracted his hand and averted his eyes when he turned from her.

Cinder merely stood there and blinked as her littlest one raced ahead to catch up with his older brothers. Hand still stupidly thrust out in front of her as if waiting for a handshake from the wind.

She wasn't sure if it was just her imagination, but she could swear she heard something shatter.

The comforting aroma of morning breakfast captured her olfactories in its warm embrace as she watched Jaune cook. Though she was still slightly mad at him for getting to the stove before she did.

Cinder sat with her fingers laced together over the kitchen table. Her hair in a pony tail that hung over her shoulder as she shifted a leg of her black running pants over the other. Patiently waiting for the boys to come down to eat. Jaune had started a conversation about... something while he cooked but Cinder's mind was other things.

Last night she had once again come home to Jaune's food, but it was the furthest thing from her mind. She took a shower and plopped herself in bed. Unusually not in the mood for sex... until Jaune got her in the mood. Saying she deserved a reward for all her hard work. As if she had done anything noteworthy. He ignored her complaints and had given her a massage. A devilishly wonderful massage. Which resulted in his head between her thighs and her being devoured by her husband for hours on end. He continued to bring her to her peak until she passed out. Making her forget about her prior troubles and left her sleeping soundly.

But the memory of the walk home still replayed in her head as she tried to solve a puzzle that seemingly had no answer.

It didn't make any sense. King always held her hand when they walked home. Always. Out of all her children, King was the most affectionate. He often went out of his way just to be near her. He would **never** just pull away from her like that... so why?

You don't even know what you did wrong and one day it's like they just stop loving you.

Cinder felt her blood run cold.

"Cindy?"

"H-huh? Yes?"

"Are you listening? I said we're gonna be working on something new in town today."

"Oh... I see..."

Why am I even thinking about this so much? I'm getting upset over nothing. It's not like this was the end of the world. So, what if he doesn't want to hold my hand anymore? I've suffered through worse hardships than this. I've stared death in the face and laughed. Something like this shouldn't bother me. DOESN'T bother me.

The light clack of tableware against the hardwood snapped her out of her thoughts as Jaune placed the food in front of her.

"So, I'm gonna be gone for most of the day," He started. "Been talking to Mr. Pewter about fortifying the town walls with some of the men. We're even considering some methods of ocean defense. Maybe a port to prevent ships from landing without our ok. It's already pretty hard to get to this island because of the whirlpools but some ships can still slip through. Can't be too careful."

He paused.

"Something wrong?" Jaune asked, noticing the look on her face.

"It's nothing." she said. Beginning to dig into her meal. Poking around the well cooked fish with her fork.

Jaune gave her a very unimpressed look. As it was very obviously something.

Cinder sighed. Realizing there was no point in hiding anything from Jaune.

"It's not that serious. Just a minor issue. I'll have it resolved before the day is done."

Jaune raised an eyebrow at that but seemed satisfied with that answer as he proceeded to call down the boys again.

Soon enough the brothers three ran down the steps heeding their father's call. Dressed in their proper wear for their usual schooling today. A simple shirt and black shorts. With very little variation between them aside from the usual. Ace's red sleeveless shirt, Jack's blue shirt, and King's yellowish gold top. Each with the Arc family symbol knitted on to it. Similar to her own white shirt and tight fitting joggers.

Cinder couldn't help but notice that King ran past her to sit next to Jack. Never mind the fact that he always sat next to *her* during breakfast.

Not that it bothered her.

She frowned and stabbed harder into her food.

8:00 - Running

Deep in the jungles of their home the Arc Matriarch and her children ran along the beaten path. The jungle was cacophony of sounds. Alive with the sounds of nature. They listened to the rush of the river. The buzz of the insects. The hiss of the serpents. The song of various ancient birds resounded all around them. As if they were at the center of a concert. The call of the of the monkeys echoed throughout the morning sky. The chirp of the crickets and the occasional roar of wild beasts only added to the savage symphony.

Cinder dashed and hopped over various stones and logs. Moving swiftly through the forest brush as her children followed behind her. She kept her senses sharp. In the black canvas of her mind's eye she could see the auras of every living thing in the area. Including the animals in the distance minding their own business tending to their own offspring or hunting prey. She made sure to take note of which ones posed a threat and which did not. She needed to remain vigilant for the sake of her young ones behind her.

Running was an important part of their daily routine. Not only for health reasons but also survival. The world was a dangerous place and she'd be a fool not to prepare them. They may have vast aura reserves courtesy of their father but they were still young. They couldn't beat every threat. So she wanted to make sure that they could at the very least run away should they ever encounter a foe that was too much trouble. Run fast, run far, and run long. That was the goal. The daily run would not only improve their speed but their stamina as well. Making sure that they could outlast an enemy not just outrun them.

So through the forest they ran. Everyday. For roughly 2 hours. All the way around the town's outer walls and the forest outside their home. The boys practiced this both with and without their aura. It was how they increased their basic physical stamina and their aura control.

Currently, they were on their 3rd lap. With one more to go before they moved on to their next class.

She didn't need to look to know that Ace was directly behind her. He was the only one actually trying to get ahead of her and that made her smile. Jack was not too far behind him. King was much further behind. She turned to glance at him. He was huffing and puffing. Still struggling to keep up but refusing to quit.

Her chest swelled with pride. Remembering the days when she jogged through these same woods when he was just an infant, carefully bundled up and strapped to her back. Too young to join his

brothers but always giggling excitedly as she fought whatever wild animal that got in her path.

She felt her lower lip quiver just slightly.

She just needed him to accept her hand again. That would fix everything. Prove that yesterday meant nothing and he was just having a bad day.

Other mothers probably don't worry about such things. I'm being pathetic.

As she leapt over a log, Cinder's stride slowed and eventually came to a halt as she sensed what was coming up. The large thud of the footsteps were plenty of indication for the boys to follow their mother's action and stop.

The oldest boys stopped just behind her, and King, just barely climbing over the log they other boys had easily hopped over, ended up rolling on the floor landing on his back just behind them. Exhausted. Looking up, he could see the reason they stopped. And he gasped when he saw it.

The head of an incredibly large creature who towered above the trees it grazed on. As well as it's heard.

"Long necks!" he shouted.

It was a group of sauropods to be exact. More specifically brontosaurus. A whole herd of them.

The island was an odd place compared to the rest of remnant. There were many creatures and forms of wildlife no one had ever seen on the main content. It was an ancient island. Something some would even call prehistoric. An island lost in time. Containing creatures Cinder had previously only glimpsed in the books she pilfered from Salem's old library.

First and foremost of those creatures were dinosaurs. They often came by to graze on the tall trees in this area. There were about 12 of them in total. The sheen of sweat could be seen across their leathery skin as the sunlight beamed down on them. Their stomps could be felt through the ground every time they moved.

The family watched in awe as the large creatures slowly turned, now having finished their meal, and continued their march to the west coast of the island.

The unexpected interruption served well as a small break for the boys but now it was time to get them running again.

However, just as she was about to signal them that their break was over, her thoughts were suddenly cut short when she sensed sharp hostility and killing intent.

Without looking, Cinder leaned to her left to dodge the oncoming pressurized beam of water that came at her from behind. The stream of water continued past her. Piercing the trunk of several trees. A loud burst could be heard in the distance as Cinder watched one of the trees topple over dozens of meters away. The boys jumped in shock, having dropped their guards, they hadn't seen the attack coming at all and turned towards the perpetrator while Cinder merely looked over her shoulder.

What stood before them was something that would make ordinary people scream in fright. That would be the natural response if you turned to suddenly find a large blue Crocodile walking upright on two feet slowly stalking toward you.

However the Arc family was different.

Ace immediately sprung into action and leapt at the creature. Charging up his semblance with the intention of roasting it with a punch. Jack tried to warn him but it was too late. If he had paid more attention in lessons, he would have remembered that these Feralidon may not be able to run fast over long distances but were

extremely quick in terms of close combat. Before Ace could land a punch, the creature dropped and spun. Using its insane reflexes and whipping its tail around for a tail swipe. Sending Ace spiraling backwards.

He somersaulted backwards until he found his feet again. Slightly skidding across the grass.

The reptile flexed its broad shoulders and its raised arm shimmered with aura before bringing it down harshly on Jack. Who dodged deftly, managing to grab his younger brother who squawked in surprise as he was pulled out of the way. The missed strike cracking the earth beneath it.

Cinder crossed her arms and observed. Her natural instinct was to slay this thing for attacking them but the creature was weak and she was curious about their performance. So she stayed her hand for the time being.

Just then the creature threw its head back. Throat inflating like a frog about to croak. The aura on its throat shined just before it opened its mouth and let out a large deluge of bubbles from its gut. Each glowed faintly with aura as they streaked through the air. They rained on the area like a light meteor shower leaving small craters in the ground and causing various tree trunks and boulders to crack and burst. The sound of which rattled in their ear drums like a hail of bullet fire from a machine gun.

The boys guarded themselves, using their aura to defend, while Cinder merely batted the attack out of her face with the back of her hand.

Ace charged at the large Crocodilian a second time. Jack was about to shout at him for not learning his lesson, but this time when the creature spun and tried to swipe with its tail he ducked. Narrowly avoiding the red spikes protruding from its back. Now, underneath its chin, Ace jumped. His semblance fully active and burning bright orange as he knocked the creature's skull back with a blazing upper-

cut. It's face exploded. Knocking out it's aura as it fell backwards. Landing on its back. Unmoving.

Cinder could sense the creature was still alive. Just unconscious. It would probably get up again in a few hours if something else didn't eat it first. There were already scars on the creature from a previous encounter. It must've been attacked somewhere else and fled here.

Her senses spiked again just before, yet another feral gator rose from the bushes. Likely the other one's mate. It leaped at her youngest son with lightning fast speed. Jaws open wide as if to swallow him whole. King fell on his behind. Too shocked to do anything.

He needn't have worried.

His mother was faster.

A sudden burst of movement from Cinder caused her to blur and disappear from sight. In a blink, Cinder got between him and the beast before it could move another inch.

She stuck the beast directly in the throat with the heel of her palm. Using her aura to send a shock through its body. Shattering it's aura in one hit and causing it to pass out. She could have slaughtered the thing but she didn't want to risk splattering them all with guts and bodily fluid.

Her son, still on the floor behind stared up at her with awe as the creature's back hit the floor. Looking upon her as he always did. As an angel straight out of heaven. Sent to keep him safe.

Her face remained neutral but internally she grinned smugly. She was worried over nothing. His admiration for his mother had not changed. He still admired and respected her.

Then his demeanor shifted.

He looked down at the ground for a moment.

She walked over to him with a smile and reached her hand out.
Ready to help him up.

He flinched when he saw her hand then got up on his own.

"Thank you, mama." He said in a hurry.

And ran past her. Like she was infected or something. Like he couldn't stand the thought of touching her. Like he'd seen the blood of innocent people on her hands. The blood of all those she'd murdered her entire life and become disgusted with her.

The smile disappeared from her face.

Leaving Cinder staring at the ground where he once sat. A seed of fear planting itself deep in her heart.

10:00 - Training

For a brief moment Cinder actually wondered if this was too extreme... and then she remembered her own childhood. Collared. Held against her will... and her resolve returned.

No. Absolutely not. Not for them.

"Ace! Do yours again."

"What!? But I broke free!" He shouted indignantly.

"No backtalk young man. You used your semblance. Do it over."

"What's the point of untying it if I can just burn through it?"

"You will not always have your semblance. You must learn to survive with or without it."

Ace grumbled and took the new pair of handcuffs his mother handed him.

During this part of the day after their rest they'd train in several different ways. They had already finished combat and archery for today. Though the goal was to prepare them for various dangerous situations.

Currently they were out on the grass in front of the house. Chairs taken from the outdoor patio table were turned towards her as she stood in front of the steps to the house. There were water bottles and a little bags of snacks still on the table from their brief little nibble following their run.

The children sat in their chairs. Struggling with handcuffs and rope alike while Cinder observed their progress.

Cinder was teaching the boys to escape from capture. Which meant escaping from various forms of restraints. They had done this practice many times before. At least Ace & Jack had. They were a bit young, so she thought having them escape from simple stuff first was the best way to go before she moved to anything too elaborate. Cinder had them escape from zip ties, various rope knots, duct tape, and chains. It was important to be prepared after all.

The former villainess had experienced countless life or death scenarios where she had to learn to escape on the fly. From her initial enslavement, to running from gang members, captured by pirates, and so on. Sometimes she couldn't even use her semblance and had to use her teeth or whatever was around at the time. She knew plenty of mothers would call her crazy, but she would be damned if she allowed anyone to capture her children. Thinking back to her own childhood experience and imagining her own child in the same scenario made her shiver. She would make damn sure they knew how to escape if something happened. She wouldn't let anyone enslave them. Not her babies.

Speaking of which, her youngest baby seemed to be having some trouble. As he often did. Though this time she may have "accidentally" tied his rope just a little too tight. Oh well. If it becomes too difficult, he'll just have to ask for her help.

Ace had just finished using the hair pin he borrowed to break out of the cuffs. He handed them back to her and she nodded in approval. After which he went to go sit next to Jack on the bench who had long finished escaping from his assigned entrapments. Now sitting down drinking water when his brother joined him. Both were now watching their youngest brother try and fail to escape from his rope knot.

Cinder crossed her arms over her chest and observed his struggling.

"Do you need my help?" she calmly called out to him.

The boy said nothing. Merely continuing to struggle with his knot. Repeatedly pulling and yanking at it. Attempting to free his hands. Unfortunately, due to his semblance his body merely stretched in response.

She took a step towards him. Reaching her hand out.

"King, let me-"

Just then he began aggressively attacking the knot. Trying to use his feet, his teeth, anything. Anything to get it off. Anything other than accepting his mother help.

Cinder unconsciously began to grind her teeth.

"Will you just let me-"

"NO!"

His sudden outburst causing her to stare in slack jawed shock as he tore through the rope with his teeth. Finally freeing himself.

There was a moment of silence. The brothers who were busy talking and eating at the bench table now turned to stare at their little brother in shock and confusion.

As for Cinder, whether she was entirely aware of it or not, her fists clenched at her side so tightly her knuckles turned white.

"You all pass. Next class. Now."

12:00 - Studying

Cinder took a deep breath and calmed herself. Pushing the events of the prior training out of her mind to focus on their current task.

The boys were behind the house now. Behind Cinder's Garden. They had already studied extensively while inside but now it was time to check their memory. This final piece of studying was always practiced outside and didn't require textbooks. Today their focus was practical knowledge. Which she considered the most important of their studies. Academics were fine but this was a world of monsters. Humanity was just coming back from the brink of extinction. She would rather teach them to survive than have some fancy job in the city.

Cinder didn't know where she had ranked in terms of homeschooling moms but in her opinion, she'd done pretty well. She had been homeschooled by Salem from a young age. She never forgot a thing she was taught and that led to her being considered a genius at Beacon. Salem's methods had been extremely effective with her. So naturally she'd implement the same teachings with her kids.

Cinder waved her hand and droplets of blue flame dripped from it like she'd dunk her hand in a lake of fire. Then with a flick of her wrist they all flung from her hand and stuck themselves in the air just above her. Looking like little candle lights in the sky. The will-o-wisps slowly changed shape to that of small feathers. Feathers made of blue flame. Flickering with occasional gold as they fluttered in the air.

The feathers flittered around her like petals in the wind. As if someone had torn open an old pillow case and tossed them about in the yard. They danced on the breeze but never touched the ground. All according to Cinder's will. The amount continued to increase until the boys were staring at a veritable army of burning blue feathers littering the skies just above their heads. Their presence ignited countless small particles of dust causing the air around them to shine and sparkle. Glittering in the sky like stars in broad daylight.

While she probably could have performed a similar feat with glass or used her bow & arrow, this method was much more effective for the task. The abilities she gained after coming back to life had their perks, as they would allow her to perform this task of education with minimal injury and no cleanup necessary.

The boys merely stared up at the mass of floating feathers in awe and trepidation. Squaring their feet to prepare for the oncoming "studying" they were about to endure.

"Now." she said. Speaking loudly and clearly such that her voice resonated throughout the area.

"First question." Cinder raised two fingers and pointed at Ace. As she did so, the army of feathers stopped their aerial dance, now hovering in place and pointed straight at him as well.

"How do you find drinking water in the wilderness?"

"Hah! That's easy. Running water or groundwater."

"Very good. How do you purify it?"

"You boil it!"

"Yes, but for how long?"

"Um... five minutes?"

Before Ace could think of another response a single feather left its position above Cinder's head and rocketed toward him like a falling meteorite. Luckily having done this training since he was small, his reflexes kicked in, and he leapt out of the way just in time to shield his face as the feather hit the ground. The resulting shock from the explosion sending him spiraling away from his brothers. He back flipped and landed on his feet.

His brothers had already braced themselves for the shock and now stood next to the raging flames that covered the area where he once stood. Staring at the otherworldly fire as it flickered. There was no searing heat as one might imagine. Instead, it was only mildly warm. The grass beneath the spot where their brother once stood was alight with the ethereal flames as well. Only the grass did not burn. It was like the opposite of normal fire. The boys never really understood how their mom's semblance worked but they knew they wouldn't have to worry about the forest being burnt down.

"T-Ten minutes?" He said, throwing out a random number.

Another flurry of feathers sailed towards him at dangerous speeds. Like heat seeking missiles.

The other two brothers struggled to hold in their laughter as they watched the oldest jump, flip, spin, zig, zag, and dodge every exploding feather that came his way while he haphazardly spewed out every random number he could think of. The sound of constant explosions made it sound as though he'd gotten lost in a minefield in the middle of a warzone.

Cinder merely smiled. Impressed with his dodging skill. She was taking it easy on him of course. When she studied with Salem her Queen summoned large spheres of black flames to fire at her whether she got the question right or wrong. Expecting her to dodge regardless. If she got too many wrong, then more pain followed. The boys were getting off lightly.

After a couple more tries Ace finally sputtered the correct answer.

"T-Three minutes!"

"Very good." Just like that, her assault stopped.

Ace collapsed face first onto the grass and sighed exasperatedly while his brothers laughed at him.

"Now then," she raised two fingers and pointed them at her second child. The feathers in the air followed suit.

The blonde in question stood calmly with his arms crossed over his blue shirt with a polite smile on his face.

"Jack, how would you apply first-aid to someone experiencing hypothermia?"

He responded swiftly and simply.

"It's important to handle them gently without moving them any more than necessary. They need to be moved out of the cold and shielded from it in any way possible. Remove any wet clothing they may have and cover them in blankets. Keep them warm and insulate them from the cold ground. Always check their breathing and if possible, supply warm beverages to warm the body."

Cinder smiled once more, satisfied with that answer.

"Very good."

Time for the big one. The youngest flinched when he knew it was his turn. She was about to raise her fingers at him just as she did the others... but she paused. Putting her fingers on her cheek instead in a moment of contemplation. An idea popped into her head.

"King." she said suddenly.

"Y-yes?"

"How would you like to sit this one out instead?"

"Huh?"

"Eh!?" The other two brothers didn't bother hiding their shock.

"You can take a break and sit next to me today while I ask your brothers more questions. You'll be exempt from class, and I'll even give you a passing grade. What do you say?"

She always made sure to never take it too easy on them, but she could risk spoiling him. Just this once. Just for this class.

She extended her hand and offered him to take it.

His eyes widened when he saw her hand outstretched towards him. As if in shock... or fear.

He then grit his teeth and became incredibly serious.

"No!" he said defiantly.

Cinder's jaw clenched.

Why was he being so stubborn?

"Very well then." she spat through her teeth. Barely restrained anger seeping in to her tone.

She pointed two fingers at him as if aiming a gun.

"How do you evade a mountain Lion?"

"U-Uh..um..."

Cinder's eyes narrowed and with the flick of her wrist a single feather came down.

King yelped and dived out of the way without an ounce of grace. Not at all as agile as his brothers. He rolled and tumbled along the grass.

Ruining his clothes with dirt and grass stains. Which would take forever to clean. That only irritated her further.

His mother asked another question.

"What's the proper method for dealing with an Anaconda?"

"Wack it with a pipe?"

Another feather shot down towards him like a falling star.

"Wrong answer." she said coldly. Though he couldn't be blamed for that one. He had seen his brothers do that multiple times. Not that Cinder cared right now.

King just barely scrambled to his feet in time to dodge the attack, but the shock was still enough to send him flying a bit. Despite that he got to his feet again. Looking incredibly disheveled. The young boy challenged his mother's fierce stare with his own.

For reasons she could not explain, Cinder felt her blood boil.

What followed over the course of the next 30 minutes would have made onlookers think there was a war going on. Or that Cinder was using a series of missiles to exterminate a rodent infestation. She asked him countless questions. He didn't get a single one right. She shot feather after feather at him. He wasn't dodging much at all either. Cinder was purposely missing but the resulting shock from the explosions was enough to knock him around anyway. The explosions knocked him around like a ping pong ball, but still he rolled to his feet anyway to face the next one. Got asked another question. Failed to answer it. So, Cinder fired at him again. And so, it went on. With each shot, she remembered every incident that had taken place today. Each time she reached out and each time he rejected her. It only fueled her to fire faster. To the point that she wasn't asking questions anymore.

By the time she was done Cinder realized she was breathing heavily. Sweating. She had stopped asking him questions at some point. Her Aura was nowhere near given out but emotionally she was spent.

King was still standing though. Clothes a torn mess like he'd walked through a tornado and come out the other side. Daring the tornado to come at him again. Fierce gaze still fixed on her fully ready for the next shot to be fired. The other two boys merely stared in silence.

As if coming out of a trance she realized what she'd done.

Something within her crumbled.

Cinder's shoulders slumped. She spoke to them trying to retain some semblance of authority. To hide the shame she felt.

"Get inside and get ready for your bath. Class dismissed."

~7 years ago~

Cinder had finally come home from killing Grimm. She'd spent the entire day slaughtering countless Grimm by herself on the island. Normally Jaune would have gone with her but someone had to watch the kids and it was his turn today.

When she walked in, she found him with a toddler under each arm. All three of them passed out asleep on the couch with the rest of the house looking like a tornado hit it. At this point she wasn't even surprised. Ace and Jack were little typhoons of destruction on their own despite being only 4 and 5.

After washing up, she headed upstairs and opened the door to the baby room to check on her littlest one.

This one was the real mystery. After the first two she hadn't been all that surprised when they had gravitated towards Jaune. That made sense to her. After a while she had just assumed that all her children

were going to do the same. So it was with much confusion that she watched him stand up in his crib practically bouncing at the site of her.

" What are you so excited about?"

He giggled and rattled the cage of his crib as she got closer.

Cinder stared into a beautiful pair of golden amber eyes that were exactly like her own. Only filled with pure love and adoration the likes of which she'd never seen. Though for the life of her, she couldn't understand why.

" Why do you want to see me so much? I'm not that amazing you know."

He reached his tiny chubby little paws up at her. Opening and closing them in a grabbing motion while holding his arms up. Looking like he was trying to jump out of his crib.

Cinder rolled her eyes and picked him up out his crib. He did this thing where he wrapped his arms around her, buried his head in the crook of her neck. Then he was out like a light.

She didn't know why he always acted like he couldn't sleep unless he was next to her... but for some reason she hoped he wouldn't stop.

Jaune had a pretty solid day today as far as he was concerned. He and the guys from the town worked pretty hard adding a new layer to the town walls while also building a port for ships. All while having a great time chatting about their wives, kids, and what it was like in the old world. He'd never get used to people calling him sir of course but it felt good to just work on a project together.

So, it was a little upsetting to feel his wife's emotions take such a nose dive. He and his wife shared a connection through their aura,

and he could feel the sinking black pit in her heart while on the road walking home. He was only a few meters from the house now, but he could tell she was up in the attic again. The silhouette of her aura clear in his mind's eye. Except she seemed to be just sitting up there. Unmoving. Which was odd in itself. Because if she was done teaching the kids normally, she'd be lifting weights right about now. Usually, he'd join her and then they'd take a shower together after... but she was sat completely still.

So, as he enters the house, he removes his boots and immediately heads up the stairs. Paying no mind to the boys down the hall as they played in the bath. Once he reached the top of the steps, he headed towards the master bedroom and threw his jacket inside before continuing on to the end of the hall.

He walked over to the bookcase that sat against the wall. It was filled with children's books. One's that she occasionally read to the kids at night before bed. All written by Cinder herself. He ran his hands over the smooth hardwood. Briefly reminiscing about back when he'd first made this thing, before pushing on the bookshelf such that it sunk into the wall behind it. He'd heard a light click and let go of the bookcase. Stepping back and watching as it opened up revealing an extra set of stairs that led all the way to the attic.

Jaune let the bookcase close behind him. Then ascended the brief spiraling staircase until he reached the latch that connected to the roof. Opening it, he stuck his head out, and from the floor of the attic observed his surroundings. He rose from the floor. Not bothering to close the latch and entered the attic.

The attic was shaped like a long octagon and room covered wall to wall in more books. Artifacts and treasures of all kinds were scattered about the room from their previous adventures around the world. Over in the back there was a couch that sat in front of another bookshelf filled with books. Next to that was another large cushioned chair where the boys sat when she occasionally taught them up here. A chessboard was still out from a game gone unfinished while

the typewriter where Cinder wrote her books looked to be still in the process of a story.

As for Cinder herself, she was sat on the couch at the far end of the room. She had her head down, her long hair cascaded over her face, while she held her hands together between her knees and she stared at the floor. It was not at all normal to see the former villainess looking so downcast.

"Cinder?"

The woman in question said nothing. Didn't even budge. Merely continued to stare at the floor in front of her.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

For a long time, she said nothing and Jaune was beginning to grow worried, but eventually she finally found the strength to speak up.

"I messed up." she said, finally.

Her voice was hollow. Empty. Like she'd gotten her soul ripped out and all that remained was this husk.

Jaune just looked confused.

"Cinder whatever you've broken we can fix it."

She shook her head.

"No. King."

"What? What about him?"

"He... he hates me."

Silence.

Jaune almost wanted to laugh, and he almost did but the look on his wife's face said this was no laughing matter.

Still the idea was absolutely absurd.

"Cinder, that boy loves you more than anything in this world. There is no way that he hates you."

"Then why is he avoiding me?"

"What?"

Cinder began her story from yesterday explaining what she'd overheard about child abandonment then told Jaune of everything that happened today and everything she'd done to win his affection back and how it failed.

"Do you see? He has abandoned me." Her voice was beginning to waver ever so slightly.

Jaune opened his mouth to interject but before he could, she continued.

"I... I knew at some point they would. That they would eventually begin to hate me. I knew it would happen. I just... I just didn't think it would happen this soon. I thought I had time... I thought I had plenty of years left befo-"

"Cinder. Stop talking like that." He said sternly without raising his voice. "That's NOT what's happening here. The boys would never stop loving you. Ever. Especially King. You are their mother. The only one they have. You are the whole world to them. They could never hate you."

Cinder leapt up out of her seat and stared at him with wide eyes. Her eyes were wet as they searched his desperately.

"Is that true? There's another reason?"

Jaune nodded.

"I'm positive. I'll go talk to him."

Jaune came down from the attic and knocked on the boys door. They gave a reply and when he opened the door, he was almost shocked to find his youngest son curled up into a ball on the floor with his brothers around him asking him what was wrong.

Though Jaune had a feeling he already knew. So, he called out to him and the lad immediately stood up upon being addressed. He told his son they needed to talk and guided the youth to the living room so they could speak while he sent the other two off to bed.

When they were in the living room, Jaune sat down on the couch and asked King to sit next to him.

"Did you know that your mother is upset?" he said calmly.

The boy looked down and nodded. Having already sensed he'd done something wrong and anticipated punishment.

"Wanna tell me what happened?"

So, he did. Starting from the very beginning the boy explained to his father everything that had transpired today. As well as everything that happened the day before.

When he was finished with his explanation Jaune spoke up.

"You know that's stupid right?"

The boy's head looked towards the floor again.

"Look, maybe one day you'll no longer have to and that's ok. But you might still choose to do so out of your own free will. It doesn't make you a baby. It just means you love your mother. So, cherish it while you can. One day you may never get to hold her again."

The young lad's head shot towards his father. A look of unbridled terror now covered his face.

"If you understand then go apologize to your mother. Tell her what happened."

He nodded rapidly and ran upstairs as fast as he could.

King climbed the steps to the attic with a quickness. He was so focused on himself he hadn't grasped how much pain his mother was in.

As he approached the room where his mother was King slowed down and stopped, hesitating at the doorway.

He found her in the back of the attic in the teaching spot where she would sometimes give them lessons.

His mother, strong, and powerful, unshakable mother, sat with her face buried into her hands. Crying quietly. It was so... wrong.

It was not truly the first time he had ever seen his mother cry, but she had never done so while looking so... *defeated* .

It was scary.

His legs carried him forward and awkwardly he stood next to her, but she hadn't noticed.

He reached out a hand to her heaving shoulder.

"Mo- Mama?"

She jerked in surprise, raising her head suddenly and exposing her teary face and reddened eyes.

That was how truly off her game she was. His mother was usually so sharp that she knew where he was at all times. He never surprised

her like that.

Cinder tried to sputter out an apology, but she stuttered and fumbled over her words. Saying how she messed up. That she wasn't the mother anyone wanted. That it was alright if he hated her.

It hurt just to listen to it.

That was not how he'd known his mother to be. It hurt even worse to know he had caused it.

Before she could continue struggling with her words, he cut her off with a hug.

"No! It's my fault! y-yesterday..."

" You still hold your mother's hand?"

" Yeah so?"

" You're already 8 years old. You're supposed to stop holding your mother's hand by then."

" Yeah, don't you know that holding your mother's hand means you're a baby?"

" N-No it doesn't..."

" Yes, it does. It means you're a little crybaby who can't do anything without his mama."

If Cinder had been expecting some grand revelation, she would be sorely disappointed.

Yet Cinder could not begin to describe the relief that ran through her. She hugged him back without warning.

King rubbed his mother's back.

"That's it? That's the reason? It wasn't because of me?"

"No! I just didn't want everybody to say I'm a baby." he said muffled into her bosom.

Cinder wasn't sure what to say to him at first. He *was* a baby. *Her* baby. And he always would be. There was nothing wrong with that. But she had a feeling that wouldn't help him feel better. She remembered her own experiences with teasing and bullying very well. She never had anyone's hand to hold back then. She was considered far too dirty for anyone to touch. Maybe that was why his actions had disturbed her so deeply. She knew what she would have rather had back then. So, she would make it simple for him.

She pulled apart from him so she could look him in the eye.

Cinder reached out her hand to him once more. Just like she had done many times today.

She asked him a simple question.

"Would you rather hold onto their words... or mommy's hand?"

His mouth parted slightly, and she could practically see the gears turning in his head as he looked back and forth between her and her hand.

Their words did not hug him. Their words did not keep him warm and fed or read him stories at night. So why hold on to them?

The choice was obvious.

Without warning he grabbed it and latched onto her with both hands. She embraced him in turn.

Cinder's heart felt full.

After minutes of quiet sobbing.

Soon he wrapped his arms around her completely. Burying his face into the crook of her neck. He silently fell asleep.

Jaune currently remained seated on the living room couch.

Jaune hadn't gone up to check on them, but he could feel both of their auras radiating relief and joy in equal measure. The cry of joy resonating from deep within their souls reached his, just as the sobbing reached his ears and he sighed in contentment.

Cinder wasn't always the best at dealing with children. Even after all this time she hasn't gotten used to it yet. She was always so terrified that she was going to mess up or ruin things. The reality was she was doing far better than most.

He only wished she had a clue just how deeply she was loved in this house.

~One Week Later~

Cinder had taken the boys to the park as usual. Though this time as she prepared to call them in, the other mothers present nodded to her, remembering her request. She had spoken to them previously about what the other children had said to her son.

So, it was with much mirth and amusement that she got to watch every single child who went to the park be escorted back home with each and every one of their hands held firmly in their mother's grasp. Some pouting, while others looked away in embarrassment.

Cinder merely smiled as she walked back to her home. Listening to her youngest talk about his day while the other two raced ahead of her.

Just Cinder dealing with mom things.

Thought I'd use this chapter to poke at Cinder's fears a little. This chapter was a bit of a big one since I wanted to show the kid's daily schedule, Cinder's parenting, and worldbuilding for the island. It's a tall order on top of having a small character arc for the episode. Not sure how well I did but I did my best. As for Cinder's arc itself I didn't know this was a thing that mothers struggled with until very recently. I had no idea it was that serious for some moms out there. I figured this made sense for Cinder as well simply because she has never dealt with such a situation before.

Admittedly not much Jaune this chapter since I wanted to focus on Cinder here. She's the star of the show. She also has kids so I had to address what that side of her life is like.

Theres a lot going on with Jaune that I haven't touched on yet. So next up is Jaune's chapter.