

## Odyssey of a Knight and His Maiden

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# **Odyssey of a Knight and His Maiden**

by [Onyx\\_Gungnir](#)

## Summary

A wandering thought is enough to change the course of a story. At least, it was enough to Jaune Arc to embark on a trip to stop the end of the world, which after the Fall of Atlas changed. During his journey, Jaune encounters an unexpected ally—an old enemy turned companion. Jaune and Cinder must confront both their past and the demons within themselves.

# Chapter 1

It started like everything in recorded history. With a wandering thought. With a simple what if. What if they didn't react to the danger, but tried to prevent it, if they tried to take the chaos, the destruction, and all that death out of the end of the story.

But they can't just abandon that many people in Vacuo and 9 hunters can't leave the already overburdened defenses there either. After the fall of Atlas, things took a noticeable turn for the worse on Remnant. Dust is more difficult and expensive for the average person to access, because the army, hunters and the air fleet are prioritised to successfully deal with the growing number of Grimms.

In a situation like this, Jaune couldn't ask his team and friends to leave the city of Vacuo and come with him on a trip that had little chance of success. The more than 25 years he spent in that cursed place known to everyone as Ever After had gotten him used to doing things by himself because there was no one with him.

25 years

25 long years alone. Alone with his guilt, with his mistakes, with his ghosts that haunted him in every waking moment and often in his dreams. In everyone's childhood memories, the Ever After is remembered as a place of adventure, magic, and wonder, but for Jaune, it was his own personalised hell from which there was no escape. A personalised hell where the torturer was himself or rather his own mind. There were days when he wished that he had the will to end this suffering so he could finally rest. Jaune can't even count how many conversations or arguments he had with people who weren't even there or brought up things against him that they wouldn't even know about.

But these things are in the past.

They were forgotten.

Forgotten like Jaune himself.

While Jaune was imprisoned in the Ever After his team wasn't really his team anymore. Or at least Jaune remembered them differently. They tried to move on. He can't blame them since everyone thought he was dead. Dead like Pyrrha who like him left nothing but tears and pain behind for the living. Oscar, Emerald, Nora and Ren formed a new team that didn't need Jaune as a leader because they had Oscar who thanks to Ozma had hundreds of years of experience at their disposal. The months they spent without him changed them because it was normal that when we lose someone, we also lose a small part of ourselves, and we will no longer be who we were. We try to accept what happened and move on with our lives, we cannot live in the past and its ghosts. Not at times like this.

Jaune wasn't the person they remembered either because the many years he spent alone had changed him. He had to because that was the only way he could survive that cursed place. He smiled less, talked less with others, his habits became completely different, he didn't seek the

company of his friends, he became much more independent. But what was most noticeable change was that he was tired, tired of everything. He was simply older than them and he was no longer the person they mourned, but a pale imitation, a shadow of his former self.

There was no harmony between them anymore, they were no longer effective together during the fights. Their movements and attacks were no longer in sync. While his team really improved during these months, he had more than two decades to develop and polish his fighting style to that level where he had no unnecessary movements in it, and he was as effective as possible during the fights. His friends fought as a team, built their strategy on each other's attacks, and moves. They knew each other's fighting style and most likely knew what the next move would be during combat. Jaune's moves became completely foreign to them, he used almost completely different moves than he used to. He no longer thought about how they could win against the enemy as a team. All he could think about was how he alone could defeat his opponents as quickly as possible. Jaune's movements were precise and somewhat brutal, filling his long-lost friends with worry and alarm each time. Jaune saw their gazes and felt alienated every time, an outsider who no longer belonged to the family he had dreamed of so much in his lonely moments over the years.

Probably his worst moments happened during the nights. Jaune would wake up almost every dawn yelling that there was a fire and run out of the room to which his friends and the inhabitants of the other rooms around them would wake up and try to contain the all-consuming flames or whatever threat they heard half-asleep. Weapons in their hands and in their night clothes, everyone rushed to the corridor to stop the danger.

But there was never any fire or danger.

Just a sweaty, deathly pale, blonde Huntsman who was now, moments later, only muttering softly about the fire. He thought that he was still in his hut outside the Paper Pleaser's village and had to save them from themselves. Usually, it was Weiss who would go over to him and gently take his hands and try bringing Jaune back to the present with a soothing voice until he stopped muttering and focused on her. The first few times the occupants of the surrounding rooms were forgiving and understanding, but the more times the yelling was repeated, the understanding was steadily disappearing, and the frustration and anger appeared on the people's faces. Jaune didn't blame them, if the situation was reversed, he too would be understanding and accepting only for a while.

The worst part wasn't the malicious comments from the people on the corridor when they realized it was Jaune who had woken them up again. No, it was the pitying look in the eyes of his friends. The pitying look he had often seen on his friends' faces after the Fall of Beacon when they looked at him and thought Jaune wasn't paying attention, or when Pyrrha was mentioned. That pitying look that he hated so much. He hadn't seen it while they were in Atlas, but ever since he had met with team RWBY in the fairy tale world, he can see it almost every day thanks to his early morning episodes.

His friends, especially Ren and Nora, always assured him with comforting words and kind smiles that there was nothing wrong and that they weren't bothered by these incidents. But after a few more sleepless nights after a long day, and their smiles were less sincere, no longer reaching their eyes. After that, Jaune decided to move to a less populated area in the

local academy where he wouldn't bother anyone at night. Nora begged him to stay, even Emerald tried to make him stay, but Jaune was adamant on the subject. So, he moved into his new room that very afternoon which was at the other end of the academy.

After that he saw them less, Jaune went to breakfast much earlier, started his duties earlier and came back later than the others. Nora and Weiss often dragged him over for movie nights or just hanging out together, but Jaune couldn't enjoy these events like in the past. Ruby had also tried to call Jaune over once or twice, but things were still tense between them since their fight in Ever After. Both of them avoided the topic as if the mere mention of it burned them, instead, she tried engaging in awkward small talks which lasted no more than half a minute.

The whole idea came up during a night when Jaune couldn't sleep after a long day and wondered how so many had gone so wrong. How could his friends have a positive attitude toward the future with such losses? How could Jaune change things that hadn't happened yet? Jaune knew that things could only get worse from here and the loss of the Relic under the academy was only a matter of time and nothing could be done about it. Others may only guess this, but he treated this as a fact. The identity of the Summer Maiden was still a mystery, but that was almost irrelevant, it was almost certain that the enemy would find her sooner than they would. They shouldn't sit here and wait for what couldn't be changed. They were at war and difficult decisions must be made to win and only he saw this.

The Beacon relic was still "hidden", but Salem knows that it was around the former academy. The academy, which is too close to the city of Vale, would inevitably be in the crossfire if the Relic was still there. If Jaune could somehow get the Relic of Choice and take it with him to the middle of nowhere where no one lived, or just go around and around on Remnant with it so they wouldn't catch him until he found a safe place to hide it. It was not the best plan, but something must be done, he had no choice, Salem could not call the gods back because the world wouldn't survive that. Jaune knew the Maiden wasn't the key for the Relic for some reason but something else, but he hadn't been able to get that out of Ozma, nor exactly where it was. If he would fail to get the crown, at least he could try to build up the local defences to give them the best possible chance of fighting for the last siege of the war.

He knew his friends wouldn't let him go. They wouldn't let him do this foolishness. They would stop him somehow, even if they had to fight him to keep him from going. They would beg him to stay to fight with them in Vacuo, or there was still hope for the desert city, but Jaune couldn't see it. Perhaps he was too old to believe that if they believed in this strongly enough, they could miraculously win here without serious losses.

In three days, he collected the necessary equipment and enough food for a couple of days, so that the others wouldn't suspect that he was going somewhere. On the fourth day, he had breakfast as soon as possible to reach the first bullhead that was travelling to the east coast of the kingdom. He had written them a letter the day before, explaining why he was leaving, but not what he was going to do. Jaune didn't want them to come after him and try to bring him back, or worse, come with him on this suicide mission. He had to go through this alone, he couldn't lose any more of his friends. He put the letter on the end of his bed and left.

The first bullhead departed two hours after sunrise. In the city, which was painted orange in the morning sunlight, the morning crowd had not yet appeared on the streets, only a few

people were trying to get to work or walking home from it. There were already several people at the bullhead station. Many people wanted to leave the city because they felt something was coming. Anyone who was paying attention knew that with all the military hardware in the city, something terrible was coming. The presence of the grimms was also increased. Just like at Atlas, and if Remnant's strongest and most modern military couldn't stop the approaching storm, what chance did Vacuo have? Many tried to leave the city in the direction of smaller settlements as soon as possible. Jaune was among the first to take his place by the window. After everyone boarded the bullhead which had seen better days, began its seven-hour journey. The view quickly became boring due to its monotony where Jaune could only see endless sand dunes under the cloudless blue sky. The flight made several stops either to pick up new passengers, deliver supplies or just for fuel. Before anyone could notice Jaune's disappearance, he had already arrived at his destination.

The town of Sandhaven was slightly smaller than Argus, but almost as busy. It was Vacuo's largest port city, where most of the kingdom's trade took place. There are several architectural styles in the city, the classic sandstone low houses of Vacuo, the elegant Valean brick buildings, but he could also see some Mistrali buildings here and there. The bullhead station and the harbour were an hour's walk from each other. During this time, Jaune wondered if he was really acting correctly and logically and if he wasn't guided by his fears. But he didn't dare to turn around and go back, it was too late for that.

The ships that were still carrying passengers didn't travel far, only to the border towns that separated Vacuo and Vale. Due to the increased price of dust or the lack of it, it was not worth launching routes further. Jaune managed to buy a cheap ticket to Searock that included a cabin and breakfast. The ship was named Starfish. It didn't look like the fastest ship, it was battered and there were some spots of rust on the hull, but these didn't bother Jaune as long as it took him to the harbour of Searock.

Jaune immediately occupied his cabin. The cabin only had the necessary things: a bed, a wardrobe, a table and two chairs. The blond knight took off his bag and armor, which he placed on the table. He propped his sword against the wall next to the bed he was lying in. Jaune was staring at the ceiling of his cabin until departure, trying to gather his thoughts and figure out how he was going to move on from Searock. The ship left the port after sunset and the passengers were all at the railings to see the night lights of the city that was getting further and further away. Jaune took his sword and he too looked at the lights of the city a little further away from the other passengers. When the lights of the city were no longer so spectacular and the temperature began to get cool, the passengers started to go back to their cabins where it was warmer.

Jaune was the only one still there. He looked at the almost invisible horizon, listened to the rumble of the ship's engine and the sound of the waves as the ship passed. Jaune took a deep breath and let it out. A moment later he reached for his sword and pulled it out of its scabbard and held it in both hands. He stroked the broken end of the sword with his thumb, being careful not to cut his finger. When the blacksmith changed him back to the age he had arrived in the Ever After, she didn't repair the sword. It was still broken.

A broken sword for a broken knight, how fitting, he thought to himself. It was still usable for its intended purpose, but it was not the real thing anymore. Jaune didn't know if that

statement was more truer for the sword or for himself. He looked at his reflection on the blade, which he could see clearly thanks to the light of the full moon. He saw his own eyes in it which were no longer as bright and cheerful as they had been when he had last gone to Beacon. They were dull and tired. Like what old men had. It wasn't like he wasn't one of them.

He slipped the sword back into its scabbard and leaned against the railing with both hands. Then he took a deep breath and looked up at the night sky as he exhaled it. Not a single star could be seen by the light of the broken moon. His gaze wandered to the onyx-coloured waves of the sea.

“I hope it will work.” he whispered to himself and went back to his cabin to sleep.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

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

Jaune suddenly woke up to a loud bang in his cabin, followed by a loud, metallic clatter on the wooden floor. He jumped out of bed and reached for his sword which had been leaning against the wall last night but was now lying on the ground. A moment later, he raised the sword beside him and placed his legs in a classic wide position and lowered himself closer to the ground. Thanks to the adrenaline he received from the unexpected situation, his senses were dialled up to 11 and his mind was hyper-focused. His heart pounded like a steam engine. Through the small round window that was on the door of his cabin, the light of a corridor lamp filtered in, projecting onto the floor a few meters from his feet. This little light was enough to illuminate the entire room dimly. Jaune slowly and attentively scanned the room with his eyes, concentrating on any sudden movement or human shape. He also tried to listen to the sounds, but his heart pounded loudly in his ears, making listening difficult.

After a minute nothing happened. The adrenaline began to disappear from his system and his heart was no longer beating with great intensity. Jaune waited patiently for another half a minute for any attack from an intruder, but nothing happened. He lowered his broken sword, his previously tense muscles relaxed, and he breathed more easily. He was trying to find what might have made the sound that woke him up. Since there were not many objects in the room, he found the source of the sound almost immediately.

Pieces of his armor were spread out on the floor. *'But what knocked them down?'* he asked himself.

The answer was almost immediate and obvious because the whole room suddenly swayed. Jaune realized that the ship had probably been hit by a stronger wave and his armor had slipped off from the edge of the table.

*'Why didn't I put it in the closet last night?'* he asked himself annoyed. He dropped his sword on the bed and went to pick up the armor pieces that had fallen to the floor.

He put the picked-up pieces back on the table and looked out the door's window. In the illuminated corridor, he didn't see anyone. Jaune's gaze wandered to the horizon, the bottom of the sky was brighter than the part a few degrees higher. Jaune pulled his scroll out of his bag to check the time. The screen showed it was 5 a.m. Going back to sleep for a few hours wasn't worth it and otherwise, he wasn't tired, he had long gotten used to short nights of sleep.

“What should I do?” he asked himself. He turned his back to the door and his gaze caught his sword.

*'A little practice can't hurt. At least I'll pass the time until breakfast.'* he thought to himself. He took fresh clothes out of his bag and quickly changed his clothes. He placed his sword in

its scabbard, which he attached to his hip, put his dirty clothes on the chair next to the door and left the cabin.

The first thing Jaune felt was the chilly morning air, which was made crispier by a soft breeze. The air mixed with the salty smell of the sea and the smell of some kind of cleaning agent. Jaune looked to the right and saw that at the end of the corridor, a crew member had just begun mopping the ship's floor. Jaune stepped to the railing, which was a few meters away and looked at the increasingly bright horizon. The first rays of dawn illuminated the bottom of the sky in beautiful shades that reflected to the waves of the sea. Several shades of lavender and gold appeared, creating colour combinations with the dark blue sea that was fitting for paintings in a museum of fine arts or the opening scene of a documentary film. Jaune marvelled at the play of colours for a bit more, then turned left and headed for the back of the ship.

The cabins were on the left side of the corridor, no sound was heard from them when Jaune walked past them, to the right he could only hear the subtle, steady sound of waves hitting the ship. The only man-made sound was the slight creaking of the ship's wooden floor, caused by Jaune's steady steps.

The "young" knight arrived at the stern deck. There was enough free space here so that he didn't have to make sure he wouldn't hit anything with his sword or people suddenly popped up in his immediate vicinity. Jaune unbuckled the sword from his belt and held it in his right hand while he put the shield on his left arm. Since there were no showers in the cabins, Jaune did not plan to practice at high intensity, only practice kata moves.

These movements burned into his muscle memory. While many people focus on attack and defense during combat, he can easily come up with a plan to win the battle. Of course, over the years, Jaune had realized that the best way to win a battle was before battle. You have to know what kind of opponent you are facing and set a trap for him so that the combat doesn't even start, or you just need to know the opponent's weak points to keep the fight short. But if you have to fight an unknown enemy, then you can always use some dirty tricks, since in combat honor worthed nothing, the only important thing was to stay alive. Of course, this was only effective against human opponents.

If Jaune's younger self could hear himself now, he would surely be horrified at what kind of person he had become. When he arrived at Beacon, his head was full of childish dreams, a young boy who imagined that all he had to do was kill grimms and become the hero of the day. It never occurred to him that grimms weren't the only kind of monsters in the world. Humans can be as bad as the grimms, sometimes even worse. He heard more than one story as a child about raiders and bandits roaming the roads. Patiently waiting for the victims to wander by. If they were lucky, they only lost their values, if not, much more. Who stops them, if not a huntsman? And yet how would he stop the bandits who's harmed gods know how many people, if not by force? His young self was extremely naïve, maybe most of his friends as well. They all wanted to help people, but did they even think about what they might have to do to help?

While he was thinking about these, Jaune slowly went through several sword katas. He learned some of them in Atlas from various sources, but he created most of them in the Ever

After. Some were for attack, some were for defense and counterattack, some for deflection and dodging, and some were focused on footwork.

In the meantime, the first orange rays of the sun illuminated the white railings of the ship. Jaune stopped and turned around to take a look in the direction of the sun. He waited a moment, then attached his sword and shield back to his belt and walked to the railing. The edge of the light disc began to appear on the horizon. It was as if it had fought its way up from the depths of the sea to slowly drive away the cold and darkness.

In the Ever After, Jaune was never able to enjoy sunrises. At first, because he usually got up after sunrise, when the sun was already well above the horizon. Then he began to explore the acres where something was always in the way of the rising sun, and when he got to the village of the Paper Pleaser, sunrises always meant that the villagers were in danger and rushed to rescue them. In Vacuo, he did not see a single sunrise. The windows of their rooms faced north, and he was trying to get his duties started after he had woken up everyone. This sunrise also fills Jaune with anxiety, he's still expecting some kind of explosion or fire.

“Beautiful, right?”

Jaune suddenly looked to the right in the direction of the voice. A man stood a few meters away and he too was looking at the rising sun. The man must have been in his late sixties. Deep wrinkles were visible on his face, his beard was greyish and well-groomed, he wore a blue hat on his head. He wore a fabric jacket of the same colour as his hat. If stereotypes were to be believed, then next to Jaune stood the captain of the ship.

“I've been sailing Remnant's oceans for over 40 years, but the sunrises still leave me speechless.” said the man, whose gaze was still to the east.

“What about sunsets? They're almost the same as sunrises, but everything happens in the opposite direction.” Jaune inquired. At this, the captain gave a good-natured chuckle.

“True, but when you've sailed as much as I did, you'll realize that sunrise is the most comforting thing in the world. Sunsets always mean that the light is about to disappear and who likes to sail in the dark? And who knows what the dark depths hold.” said the old captain. The man stepped closer to Jaune and stretched out his right arm.

“I'm Edmund Weaver, the captain of the ship.”

“Jaune Arc. Huntsman.” Jaune introduced himself and shook Captain Weaver's hand.

“I know, I've seen your practice. Nowadays, hunters rarely travel on my boat. I hear that each of them is protecting the cities from the grimms. It's strange that you're not going to Vacuo, rumors have it that all help is needed there.” the captain inquired. Jaune wasn't sure how to respond.

“I'm going to Vale, I think I can be more useful there than in Vacuo,” Jaune replied. Captain Weaver acknowledged this with a hum. Both men's attention went back to the sun, which was already half up in the sky.

“I don't want to get involved in anything that I have nothing to do with, but I've met people like you. People whose faces are similar to yours. Tired, haunted, worried, but determined. Each of you is running from something: friends, family, love, mistakes, and your goals are very similar: to hide, to fix, to save, or just run away from it. But everyone thinks they know the right solution to the problem, and they have to do it on their own. It doesn't even occur to them that they might fail alone.” said the captain, looking at the sun. Jaune didn't know what to say at all, instead, he remained silent and pondered the captain's words. The old captain stood back from the railing and looked towards Jaune.

“I hope I haven't said anything intrusive, and maybe you can find some wisdom in an old man's nonsense. I won't hold you up any longer, in half an hour we will start serving breakfast in the dining room, I hope to see you there. Have a good day!” said Captain Weaver cheerfully and walked away. Jaune was alone again on the stern deck. Alone with his concerns. Jaune wasn't exactly happy with the captain's words, the fears of the previous days had returned, and breathing was a little harder again.

*'Thank you, Captain, I really missed this early in the morning.'* thought an annoyed Jaune and headed back to his cabin.

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Jaune went to the dining room an hour and a half later, hoping to not run into the captain, he didn't really want to hear any more “helpful” things. The dining room was at the front of the ship, a spacious space with many windows from which there was a 180-degree view of the sea. The dining room had ten rectangular wooden tables, each with four chairs, and next to the entrance was the table where the staff put their breakfast. Pre-packaged sandwiches were placed on the table. The room was half full, as he could see all the passengers who were watching the city lights from the deck yesterday were here. Jaune picked up two ham sandwiches and sat down to eat at an empty table in the corner.

The other passengers were talking to each other about different topics, the weather, what their profession was, whether they had been to Vale, and the like. But one conversation caught his attention.

“Did you hear what's going on in Vacuo?”

“No, why?”

“Rumor has it that girl who spoke in that message, that Rose girl or who, she is still alive. Isn't that great?”

Jaune looked to his left with his eyes and saw two old women talking over their morning coffees.

“I don't see why it would be great that the person who announced that the Grimm has an immortal leader who destroyed the most powerful kingdom in the world, had suddenly

reappeared. The girl who told the world that magic exists and there are relics with extraordinary powers, tied to fairytale characters, doesn't care who hears it. The huntress who asked us not to panic despite all this. You're right Minerva, that's really great. After all, things are not about to happen again in the capital like it did in Atlas.”

“Lucy, you don't need t-“

Jaune stopped paying attention to the rest. What that old woman said made him think and somewhat agree with her. *'Perhaps telling everything we knew about Salem; the maidens and the relics were not strategically wise. Then expecting people not to panic was downright naïve, if they had told a smaller group first, maybe things would have been better because a crowd is as smart as its dumbest member. If one starts to panic, suddenly the others also lose their heads. And what's going on in Vacuo doesn't help either.'* he thought to himself grimly.

Jaune quickly finished his sandwiches and made his way back to his cabin, not wanting to risk catching another conversation that would remind him of the past or tell him how bleak the present truly was.

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Jaune had spent the rest of the day in his cabin. He was busy cleaning his armor, sword, and shield, and after he was done, he spent his time sorting out his gear and writing a short list that he couldn't acquire in the academy and would come in handy for the journey ahead. It was almost evening when he finished his chores. He decided to go to bed early, but he couldn't sleep.

The conversation with Captain Weaver and the conversation between the two old ladies was on his mind. *'What if Weaver is right and I'm just running away from my problems? If I really going to fail alone? Do I need help? Did Ruby's message do more harm than help? Will my plan help us at all, or will I just bring us closer to the end? What am I even doing?'* These questions didn't let him for the rest of the night, he tried to find reassuring answers desperately, but he couldn't find one for all of them. He lay awake in his bed all night until the light of the morning sun shone into his eyes.

He didn't go out for breakfast, but rather took a pack of biscuits out of his bag and ate it. He didn't want to go out and get more concerned about his mission. The end of the cruise was close anyway, they should arrive in Searock early this afternoon. A few more hours in the cabin alone didn't even bother him, it was nothing for him. He gathered his things, put on his armor and backpack, and attached Crocea Mors to his belt for the last. He quickly turned off his scroll, he didn't want to deal with all those missed calls and unread messages today when they got close to the town. These are all the problems for the future Jaune, the present one had enough on his plate. Jaune spent the rest of the voyage in the bow of the ship, watching the sea.

After a couple of hours, land appeared on the horizon which grew larger as time passed. After an hour and a half, the ship arrived at Searock's harbour. The town was nothing special. It

was small but it had a large enough harbour, probably producing something valuable that needed the harbour. The city was surrounded on all sides by thick stone walls, it was only open from the sea. A clock tower made of red bricks towered above the buildings in the distance. The clock would soon ring its bell, announcing that it was four o'clock.

After the ship docked, the passengers began to leave the ship. At the exit, Captain Weaver said goodbye to the passengers, thanking them for choosing his ship. The captain shook Jaune's hand and wished him success on his journey. Jaune thanked him and headed for town.

Opposite the port on the other side of the street were the warehouses. They were about three stories high and had their walls made from sheet metal. This was probably where incoming goods arrived, and products made in the city were taken from here. Jaune turned right and headed towards what seemed to be the shortest path out of the industrial district.

After walking for five minutes, he reached an intersection with a bar on the opposite corner. Its guests were probably the port workers and sailors who had returned back from the sea because it was typically decorated that way. The sign which was advertising the name of the bar was hung on the wooden wall in a steering wheel, a fishing net wrapped around the lights above the door, flowers in wooden barrels under the windows. As far as Jaune could see through the large windows, he could only see dockworkers and local fishermen. Soft music, loud laughter and buzzing conversations filtered through the shabby door of the building.

The knight decided this place would be good to collect information about where he could find a relatively good inn or hotel. As he approached the door, the sounds coming out became louder. When he went inside, he saw that the bar was almost full of customers, the only free chairs were at the counter. After taking a seat, a balding bartender in his 50s asked what he could bring. Jaune, being in a funny mood, asked for rum to suit the place.

“Can you recommend a good hotel to a passerby?” Jaune asked the bartender as he returned with the glass of rum.

“There's a good place two streets away from here, you step out of the bar and go to the right, after two streets turn left and after about 200 meters you are there. You can't miss it, it's almost next to the vet's office.” the bartender said helpfully.

Jaune thanked him for his help and the bartender returned to serve the locals. Jaune looked around the bar while drinking, there were all kinds of people here, old and young, tired and fresh, sad and happy. You could hear the conversations if you listened:

“It was the biggest fish I've ever seen!” boasted a fisherman.

“I don't think tomorrow will be bet-“said another.

“They'll take it away on Friday.” said someone who looked like a storekeeper.

“Wilson has a day off then.” said the man next to him.

Jaune turned back to the counter and looked at his half-empty glass and listened to the people sitting beside him talking.

“And do you have a suspect, Bill?” one man asked the other.

“Not yet, for now, we're reviewing surveillance camera footages. If we see more of the thief, it will be easier to track down the culprit.” Bill said.

“Were they alone?” asked the previous man.

“As far as we know, yes. They didn't take too many valuable things according to the owner. He must have been in a hurry, the alarm went off soon enough, he even left a piece of a pair of that fancy leather gloves there. You know which's in the window.” Bill said.

Jaune didn't listen to the end of the conversation. The size of a settlement doesn't matter, thieves have always been and always will be. In villages, farm animals would disappear or a thing or two from the barn, in the cities they break into shops and take what they can. Jaune drank the rest of his drink and left the bar.

It was already late afternoon. The temperature had cooled down to a pleasant level, not cold but not hot either. The light of the setting sun illuminated only the roofs of the buildings, the painted orange facades reflected the light back in a similar colour, painting the whole street in pale orange light. Jaune walked past the fire station, which was next to the warehouses, probably to get the fire under control quickly if it was needed. If a city's food warehouse would be destroyed, it can be bad news for residents, especially at times like this, on the edge of the desert.

After a few minutes of walking, Jaune found himself in the main square of the city. There was a small police station, a hospital, the clock tower that he saw earlier was built on the city hall and a park with benches and fountains. There were a lot of people in the park. After work, parents probably would bring their children down here to play, where they would chase each other on the grass while the parents talked to each other.

It was strange for Jaune; to think that despite his appearance, he was the same age as them or maybe older than them. Jaune briefly thought about what it would be like to be a parent but quickly dismissed the idea. *'That ship is long gone, I'm a mess anyway. Who needs that?'*

He headed left and soon found himself outside the hotel. It was no different from the buildings next to it, only the sign reminded the people that it was a hotel. The lobby belonged to a typical hotel with a couple of red sofas and a small café table in front of them, the floor was made of white marble. Jaune walked down the red carpet that led him to the reception, where a young man with red hair greeted him at the Margareta Hotel. Jaune asked for a single bedroom just for this night. The receptionist quickly gave him the room's key after Jaune paid.

The room was on the first floor. When Jaune entered he quickly looked around. Opposite the door was a narrow window facing the street, a few meters in front of it was a pale pink couch facing a wall-mounted television. In the left part of the room was a single bed with a bedside table. Next to the bed was the door leading to the bathroom.

Jaune quickly removed his bag and armor, which he dropped on the couch. Feeling the gravitational field of the bed in the room due to lack of sleep, he put Crocea Mors on the

bedside table with its grip towards him and collapsed into bed. Sweet nothingness embraced him almost immediately.

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Jaune was able to sleep through the whole night. That fact put a little smile on his face. If others heard this, they would surely look at him strangely, but if they knew why it was a good thing, they would be happy for him.

After a quick shower, jaune walked over to the grocery store across the street that he saw yesterday, to buy himself breakfast. An hour later, he was standing in the middle of the room, ready to leave. Jaune reached into his pocket for his scroll to see what time it was. When the screen didn't light up, he remembered turning it off. He looked at his reflection on the dark screen for half a minute, it became harder to breathe again. He tried to gather the courage to face the consequences of his decision, to face the anger and sorrow he had caused. *'When did they realize I was gone?'* Jaune asked himself. He didn't have the willpower to turn on his scroll, he didn't want to listen to the sound of constant notifications. He had to keep going, he couldn't waver so close to the start. Jaune quickly put the device back in his pocket and left the room.

The gates of Searock were relatively close to the hotel. On the sides of the gate were two towers that rose higher than the walls, with sentinels on top of them who had binoculars and rifles. Before Jaune reached the gate, he noticed a supply store on his way, where he could get some missing items.

The shop was packed with all kinds of equipment a traveller would need beyond the walls. The wall behind the counter was full of weapons, at the other end of the store were various tents and sleeping bags. The shelves which were dominating the centre of the store were lined up with knives, shoes, flashlights, thermal clothes, and MREs. Jaune quickly looked around, picked up what he needed and took them to the cash register. A tent, some MREs, a compass, a detailed map of the surrounding area, and a flint stone for starting a fire.

“Is there anything I need to know about local roads?” Jaune asked the salesman after he paid.

“I haven't heard much worth mentioning lately. The number of grimms has decreased in recent months, in the past the guards saw more than one per week, but now there are weeks when none wander here.” the salesman replied.

“Huh, thanks. Goodbye”

“Have a nice trip, kid.”

Jaune walked out of the store and pondered on the salesman's words. *'Salem would have called the Grimms to Vacuo, or did she just direct them towards the bigger cities here? But if there aren't many grimms on the roads, it doesn't mean they're safe, it's ideal for bandits.'* he thought darkly to himself.

The guards greeted him when he got close and opened the gates for him. They wished him luck and closed the gates behind him.

Jaune looked across the landscape, he only saw rocky hills that seemed to never end. Between the reddish and earthy brown hills, he saw a path which according to the map would lead him to the Valean border.

Jaune felt that this was where his journey really began. The point of no return. Oddly enough, he felt no worry but rather excitement, almost eager to take his first steps. The fears of the previous days had vanished, he was sure that he was doing the right thing. They will win, there was no other way, and after that, he can finally rest. But before that, he had to go through one last challenge, perhaps the most difficult one, but he was ready.

Jaune started to walk down the path with confident steps which led him to the realm of rocky hills.

## Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year!

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

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

Jaune travelled through the desert for the third day. His path led him to the continent, farther from the sea, but closer to the mountains separating Vacuo and Vale.

These three days were relatively challenging. Due to the extreme heat, Jaune was unable to move from noon to late afternoon, until temperatures cooled back to tolerable levels. During the day, Jaune hid in shady places from the sun's scorching rays and tried to sleep for a few hours. Thanks to this, he was able to go farther in the evenings, so he could get out of this furnace faster.

However, it was more dangerous to travel in the evenings. Jaune encountered several Grimms a few times, mostly unnoticed by them, but twice he had to get into a fight. Fortunately, there were small Beowolf packs – easy kills. But even so, Jaune encountered fewer Grimms than he expected.

The morning of the fourth day was like that of the previous ones, the cold of the morning began to be replaced by the unbearable heat. The path that Jaune followed has become more winding in recent hours as the cliffs towering over Jaune have become larger. After a sharper turn, a mountain range emerged among the hills. Its colour did not differ from the brownish-reddish shades of the hills, except in some places. At those points, the peaks of the mountain range stretched higher into the sky, and their peaks were covered with white snow caps. Luckily, Jaune didn't have to climb the entire mountain because the road led to a mountain pass.

Jaune looked down at his own shadow which was very short. He knew that this meant that the sun had almost reached the climax of his orbit.

It was almost noon.

This meant that temperatures would soon become unbearable in the sun and would not cool down until late afternoon. The armor he was currently wearing only made his situation worse.

Jaune looked around the barren landscape and saw a rock formation that could shade him for the next few hours and from where he could clearly see the pass.

As Jaune rested in the shade, he pulled the map out of his bag. Luckily, the road he was currently on, was on the map, otherwise the orientation in the bleak area would have taken longer.

He quickly found where he was. According to the map, the mountain in front of him was The Ember Mountain. And on the other side of the mountain, Vale begins.

Jaune almost felt at home, even though his home was in a completely different part of the kingdom.

Jaune put the map back in his bag and leaned back against the shadow-giving rock. He looked at the snow-capped peaks of the mountains until he could move on.

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When the light of the sun got closer to orange and the rock casted a longer shadow on the ground, Jaune decided it was time to move on.

Luckily, the top of the pass was only a few hundred meters higher than the foot of the mountain, so Jaune was able to make the way up relatively quickly. By the time he got close to the highest point of the pass, the muscles of his legs were burning, he was breathing heavily through his mouth, and his clothes were soaked with sweat.

There were only a few steps left of the climb, and these few meters were the most difficult for Jaune so far. He promised himself that he would rest at the top of the pass to encourage himself to continue.

When it was finally no higher, Jaune was able to stop to control his breathing. He looked up and a beautiful sight was revealed to him.

Green.

A green grass field.

A vast expanse of emerald waves rippled under the caress of a gentle breeze. It was as if Jaune was looking at the sea from the mountainside. The grass sea rippled so softly that Jaune wanted to swim in it after the hellish temperatures of the desert. Above the grass field, beautiful fluffy white plumes of cloud travelled smoothly across the azure sky. It was like a herd of elephants wandering slowly but unstopably overhead.

Jaune almost had tears in his eyes at the sight of the scenery. The landscape was so simple and beautiful. Nowhere did he see other vastly different acres or the chasms that separated them. And most importantly, nowhere did he see a giant tree on the horizon that so often filled him with anger and fear long ago.

Jaune noticed a small village among the grassy hills in the distance. It was a few hours walk from the mountain's foot. The brown buildings surely stood among the emerald green waves. Not far from the village, he saw sheeps which looked almost like white dots from this far.

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By the time Jaune got close to the village, the sun had already set behind Ember Mountain, turning the landscape behind the jaune into a beautiful silhouette.

There was a calm silence in the village. Orange lights shone in the curtained windows of the wood houses, giving Jaune enough light to see the streets comfortably. While he was passing by some houses, conversations and other sounds could be heard. Jaune headed for a building that looked like an inn. It was a slightly larger building than the ones around it, but it didn't stand out very much from the rest of the village. The open doors and the emanating sounds indicated that it was open to guests. As Jaune got closer to the door, he heard more and more sounds.

When he walked through the door, the conversations faded away.

A dozen people were sitting inside, and all eyes were on him.

Jaune walked slowly towards the counter, where the barkeeper was gently wiping a glass. As he walked through the room, everyone's gaze was on him. The people's faces were a combination of curiosity and uneasiness as if they expected him to take someone's head with his sword. Jaune felt like he was in an old Vacuan western movie.

As Jaune sat down at the counter, his eyes met the barkeeper's, who turned away after a moment to put the clean glass away. Jaune chose a spot where he could keep an eye on the other guests. Most of the people were still looking at him. Some continued to drink their drinks or converse quietly with their eyes glancing at Jaune.

Jaune ordered a drink when the barkeeper got close, who had maintained his stoic composure since Jaune walked through the door. As the bartender poured Jaune's drink in front of him, the tension in the room grew, creating an almost suffocating atmosphere.

As Jaune was drinking he looked around and saw that the guests were still waiting for something to happen. The bartender was still standing in front of him, looking at Jaune.

"Who are you?" he asked Jaune calmly.

"Jaune. Jaune Arc."

"And what brings you our village, Mr. Arc?"

"Just passing through. I plan to leave as soon as possible."

"To where, may I ask?"

"Vale."

"Vale? Hmm. I heard that things are not going too well, up there. Not like anywhere else is so much better nowadays."

"You're not wrong on that." he said while he looked around again. The people still kept an eye on him. "Soo? This interrogation on arrival is a local thing or am I just the lucky one?" He tried to ease the conversation with a little humor.

“Strangers with a sword makes folks here uneasy Mr. Arc.” Looks like humor didn’t work. “They are either huntsmen who became a rarity in the plains, or they are bandits disguising themselves as huntsmen to scout the village for the rest. It wouldn’t be unheard of. But the question remains: Are you a huntsman or someone who would bring harm to us, Mr. Arc?” he raised an eyebrow when he said Jaune’s name.

“I’m a huntsman, but I guess a bandit would say the same thing. The best I can do is to show my licence.” Jaune was reaching into his pocket.

“It will do for now.” declared the barkeeper then moved closer to read Jaune’s huntsman licence. “You are from Atlas? I heard what happened there. Sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks, but I only graduated there. I’m Valean.” clarified Jaune.

“Really? Then why did you go there?”

“I only graduated there but I started at Beacon.” elaborated Jaune.

“The Fall?” questioned the barkeeper.

“Yeah.” answered Jaune quietly and drank his remaining liquor.

“This one is on me.” announced the barkeeper while he poured another one for Jaune. “Then we can say life has been hard on you.” Jaune knew that for a long time, this was maybe the best way to describe his life. He had a lot of time to ponder on the past.

“You have no idea.” confirmed Jaune.

“I apologise for being...rude, but a few concerning things happened recently. One can never be too cautious.”

“What concerning things?” queried Jaune.

“Someone stole women's clothes while they were hanging outside a few days ago. Maybe it doesn’t sound like a very big thing to you but in a small village like this can be scandalous, if it was one of us. If we are lucky the opportunist thief has moved on already and they were not from our community.”

“Hmm. And the rest?” inquired Jaune. “You referred to more.”

“There have been a few attacks on villages, north from here. Grimm attacks.”

“Grimm attacks on villages have never been strange before.” stated Jaune.

“No, they have not, but since most of them left for the cities, they become somewhat strange. Or the survivors claiming so. According to them, all the attacks happened after midnight. You know why it’s strange, right?”

“Of course. The Grimms can sense negative emotions, it attracts them, but night attacks are rare because everyone or almost everyone is sleeping. Nightmares still happen, of course, but

never enough for them to notice from afar, especially in villages. This only could happen near towns or cities, but statistically, it can still happen with smaller settlements.” explained Jaune.

“Well, it happened with five villages in the past month.”

“Five?”

“Five in the past month, seven before that.”

“What?” asked Jaune. He knew something was up, five was too many in a single month, let alone seven.

“You heard me alright, and these attacks are just the ones I know about. Who knows how many more happened?” This was troubling news. Jaune dreaded to think how many more attacks had happened.

“This is not the strangest thing about them.” said a new voice behind Jaune. An old man sat down on the stool next to him with his glass. The first thing that Jaune noticed about the newcomer was that he was very thin. The once elegant clothes hung on him. He wore some kind of business suit that looked like a few decades old, Jaune only saw these in old films. The old man was almost bald, had many wrinkles around his brown eyes, and a white beard covered his entire face.

“Laird, those people lost their loved ones and their home, I doubt what they think they saw in the middle of a Grimm attack.” said the barkeeper in an even voice, like he had this conversation many times. He narrowed his eyes at Laird and said with a stern tone. “They are not real!”

“They are *real!*” Laird stressed the last word, “I know they are real because I saw them myself.”

“Saw what?” asked Jaune.

“The Malaluxes.” everyone near them looked at him strangely, like he was crazy, but Jaune had a puzzled look on his face.

“I never heard of them.” said Jaune.

“I’m not surprised, it’s an old folk tale, here in the plains.” clarified the barkeeper.

“It’s not a tale! I saw them. By the Brothers, they almost killed me!” he turned to Jaune.

“Have you ever heard about The Lights of The Tall Grass?”

“Never.”

“Then let me tell you what happened to me all those years ago.” he drank from his glass and started. “It happened about forty years ago after midnight; I was heading back home from a business trip by train. We’re crossing through the plains. I was reading some newspaper in my compartment when the train suddenly came to a stop. At first, I thought we almost missed a station or something, but when I looked out the window, I could only see that bloody big

grass and nothing else. I started to look for the conductor to ask why the train stopped in the middle of nowhere, but I couldn't find him in the hallways. I thought maybe we hit something, and he went to the front of the train to check it out. It happens sometimes in the wild, especially at night.

I stepped out of the train onto the tracks to have some smoke. Curse me, I should have stopped a long time ago by then. It was a pretty night, the weather was nice, you could see all the stars in the sky, the temperature was comfortable. It was such a perfect night.

Anyway, the conductor showed up a few moments later with a lantern. He told me that we're taking a brief stop to build up steam.

Huh, what a lying old man he was. But who would have believed him if he told the truth?

Before he walked off towards the rear cars, he warned me to not wander around because they would go no matter what, but I thought he said that because he didn't want the train to be delayed any longer."

"Let me guess, you ignored his warning, right?" interjected Jaune.

"Of course." chuckled Laird and continued. "During smoking, I noticed some strange blue lights in the tall grass. Me being a complete bloody idiot, I wandered off the tracks to investigate those lights. I ventured into the grass deeper and deeper, but the lights moved deeper as well. Then I heard the conductor's call to board the train. I tried to go back to the train, but I couldn't see where the train was, that damn grass was higher than I was. I started to run towards what I believed was the right direction," he took a swing of his drink. "Then I stumbled upon one of those lights. What I saw there, I won't forget while I live. It was a sight more horrifying than death itself.

This creature, if you can even call it that, looked like a human, but it had become a twisted... nightmare. Almost all its facial features had vanished, it was like a blank canvas, pale grey skin stretched over every inch of its body. The only human-like thing about it was its form and its gaping, needle-tooth-filled mouth that let out a horrible cry when it spotted me. It was a gods-awful cry." Laird stared before him as if he had just seen the monster that he described.

"The creature lunged at me, almost grabbed me. I started running away from this thing as fast as my legs were able to. In the corner of my eyes, I saw more monsters getting close to me. Luckily, I spotted the orange lights of the train through the grass in the distance. I dashed towards the tracks, screaming for help, but before I could reach the tracks, I was thrown to the ground. They had caught up to me.

I thought, it was it, I was about to die. But then a wall of fire was between me and them, it was enough to startle the monsters and drive them away. I turned around to see the conductor, on the gravel hill, shouting at me to run. Without hesitation, I sprinted with him towards the moving train. We managed to climb aboard the back of the train just in time.

After we caught our breath, he started explaining how the creatures despised fire." he took a breath and continued. "I asked him what those monsters were. He believed that once they're

people, the souls of those who were lost when they tried to cross the plain, or those who got off the train at the wrong place.

By the way, he spoke of it I knew this happened more than one time. Asked him about it and his answer confirmed my suspicion. The train loses steam sometimes and always stops exactly at that spot, and then it's like a kind of door opens up out there. He thought it leads into.... some....other world.

He warned me not to speak about this, no one would believe me, but I once again ignored his warning. He was right of course, just look around, everyone thinks that I'm crazy or just a liar, but I know what I saw that night." said Laird with conviction.

"I fail to see why this story is connected to the Grimm attacks." remarked Jaune.

"It's connected because the survivors saw them as well."

"They didn't see them, only some kind of...white shadows in the distance during the attacks." said the barkeeper to Jaune, then turned to Laird. "And you didn't *see* any Malalux either. You must have fallen asleep on the way back. I don't know why you still claiming that this really happened but stop it! Everyone thinks that you are short on a marble."

"Yeah Laird, just stop it. You retell this shit at least once a week. Make up something else!" said a patron not far from them.

"Don't listen to them! The Malaluxes are real, and they're no longer waiting for the lost souls." said Laird to Jaune and left with his drink.

Jaune waited until Laird was far enough and turned towards the barkeeper and asked. "What do you think? What did he really see?"

"A madman sees what he sees. You should not dwell on things like this, life is too short for that." He continued to clean the glasses. "And besides, it is just a fairy tale to scare away the children from the tall grass where they would be lost. The Malaluxes are just as real as The Girl in the Tower or like the Rusted Knight."

Jaune clenched his free hand into a fist at the mention of Salem, but he almost broke his glass with the other when the barkeeper brought up his moniker. It was not the best comparison in history. It didn't put Jaune at ease, on the contrary. Salem, Ozma, and himself were living proof that not all fairy tale was made up. The three of them were real.

Then why wouldn't be the others as well?

"Yeah, just as real." said Jaune while he kept his gaze on his almost empty glass.

---

*Crocea Mors hit again its wooden target.*

*Jaune had always liked to do a little training in the early afternoons. It was a pleasant pastime for him, especially since he moved back to his home village. The dummies set up on the edge of Ansel could experience the blade of his family heirloom every day.*

*"Is it dead yet?" asked a familiar voice near Jaune.*

*Jaune looked to the side. Pyrrha stood there in her combat uniform. Watching him with a gentle smile. Her crimson hair was tied up in her well-known style which moved gently in the autumn breeze.*

*"There's still a little life left in it, but I think I'm going to leave it alive this time." Jaune joked back.*

*"How noble of you, my knight" she said to him as she walked up to him. Jaune looked into Pyrrha's beautiful emerald green eyes which always reminded him of a forest where he would gladly get lost.*

*"We should head back home." she said while she pulled him close. "It's getting late." Jaune looked to the side and saw that the sun was already close to the horizon.*

*"Yeah, you're right, Pyr."*

*"As usual." she said playfully.*

*Pyrrha grabbed his hand as she moved away from him, and she gently pulled him along towards Ansel.*

*"Come, you said you're leaving her alive this time."*

*"Her?"*

*"Yes, her." she answered while looking into his eyes with a smile. "Penny."*

*"What?!" he exclaimed and spun around.*

*The once-Winter-Maiden was behind him. Tied to a wooden pole. She had multiple wounds, the blood painted her previously snow-white blouse to deep red. She missed an arm. From the bleeding cuts sparking wires were sticking out. Penny slowly looked up to his eyes and asked him weakly. "Why?"*

*Jaune raised his arm to see his ancestors' sword. It was broken and blood-soaked.*

*"I - I don't - I didn't-"*

*"YOU KILLED ME!" Penny yelled at him then she leaned forward as much as the ropes let her.*

*"You failed me, just like you will fail them." She looked behind him.*

*Jaune turned around and his blood froze in his veins.*

*Ansel was in ruin. Overrun by Grimms. And between Jaune and the ruins, his friends and family. All of them were dead. Their broken bodies were lying on the ground, in more than one piece.*

*“Jaune.” said Pyrrha behind him and he immediately turned around.*

*A grey monster jumped at him with a mouth full of needle-like teeth.*

---

Jaune’s eyes snapped open and lurched forward; his heart was pounding in his chest. Beads of cold sweat dotted his forehead, he struggled to catch his breath. It took Jaune a moment to pull himself together, the vivid images from his dream still lingered before his eyes.

The fire barely gave light to his eyes, it was almost burned down. As he looked around, he saw no signs of movement around his camp.

Two days since he left the village at the foot of Ember Mountain, but the same nightmares still haunted him at night.

Pyrrha, Penny, his loved ones were the usual guests of his nightmares in past years, but it appears that the Malaluxes had become the new replacement for the Grimms. Jaune thought about them a lot, Laird’s story occupied his mind in the past days.

If it turned out that Malaluxes existed which had a good chance based on recent years’ experience, then he was facing a whole new level of problem. Are they a new kind of Grimm? Salem’s work? If they were not Grimm, how he even supposed to kill them? How far are they spread? Were they the Brothers' creation as well?

These questions captured his mind to his current location. To the edge of The Whispering Forest, one of Vale's biggest forests in the south. He decided that it would be wise to put up a camp here for the night before entering the forest in the morning.

The forest itself gave Jaune an uneasy feeling. It was hard to describe at first but now it’s like something was watching him from among the trees. Probably some animal kept their eyes on him. But he couldn’t see further into the forest than ten meters, so he couldn’t be sure. It didn’t attack him yet which gave him some peace.

Jaune didn’t want to go back to sleep. He had enough of this nightmare, he would rather be a little sleepy than dream again about that horrible scene.

Jaune threw some wood to the campfire, so it would last a few more hours which should be enough till dawn. He laid back on his makeshift pillow and did his very best to not think about Pyrrha, Penny or anyone else. His sole focus was on the shiny dots and pale shapes on the inky sky.

---

From the depths of the Whispering Forest, not far from his camp, a single amber-coloured eye watched his every move well before he woke up from the nightmare.

## Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone,

Thank you for the all kudos, bookmarks and comments and followings. I hope you liked the new chapter. I plan to update once per month, or so.

Laird' story is from Love, Death & Robots, season 2 episode 5. The Tall Grass. It's one of the best episode in the series, to me at least. Check it out if you are interested.

Leave a comment if you want to. See you in February.

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

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

The calmness of the forest was shattered by an ominous rumble in the distance. Dark grey clouds gathered overhead, making the Whispering Forest darker. The wind, once a gentle whisper among the trees, intensified into a frenzied howl, whipping through the branches with a ferocity that made it look like the trees were dancing.

Jaune quickened his pace, seeking refuge from the impending storm. He hoped that there would be some kind of shelter nearby. But it seemed that each step only led him closer to the rumbling clouds.

As the thunders were getting closer Jaune was almost running among the tree trunks. He must find a shelter fast. His heartbeat was getting stronger in his ears, his breath was laboured, and his vision was getting darker at the edges.

His legs pounded against the hard ground as he searched for any protection against the storm, but the forest, with its labyrinthine paths and tangled undergrowth, offered him no solace. The time between the thunders were almost gone. The air was heavy with the scent of rain. Smaller branches and leaves were falling around him in the wind.

Desperation clawed at Jaune's chest as he stumbled through a particularly thick undergrowth.

When he reached its other side the first droplets started to fall, he was out of time. He frantically looked around anywhere to hide.

His eye caught a huge tree trunk with a small round hole leading inside of it. Most likely made by a forest animal which deserted it a long time ago, but space inside had grown along with the tree during the decades.

It would be an uncomfortably tight fit, but the hole was above somewhat the ground. He would remain dry, which could be lifesaving since he wouldn't be able to gather dry wood for fire. He quickly pulled out his sleeping bag to use it for padding and crawled into the nook. He couldn't lay down inside of here, but he could sit and be able to prop his legs up against the trunk to rest.

Jaune was shivering slightly every time when the sky was rumbling while he tried to find a comfortable position. When he found it, torrents of rain cascaded from the sky in a deluge, turning the earth into a sodden quagmire beneath a tree hole. Thunders rumbled through the trees like a war drum, shaking the very ground beneath him.

He shut his eyes and pressed his hands to his ears to block out the storm. His chest tightened with an all-too-familiar sensation. His heart raced erratically, each beat echoing like a drum in his ears, as panic threatened to consume him whole. Jaune repeated only one sentence to himself.

*He must not think about anything. He must not think about anything.*

He knew he could do it, just like many times before. Desperate for escape, Jaune pressed himself deeper into the confines of the tree trunk. But the storm raged on, lightning danced across the sky in jagged arcs, casting eerie shadows in front of his shelter that seemed to mock his torment,

His heart hammered against his ribcage like a wild beast desperate to break free. Jaune tried to focus on his breathing, maybe it would help to calm down. He commanded the muscles around his chest, slowly in, slowly out, slowly in, slowly out.

In the past, this helped to calm down. This is just like any other ponderstorm he went through, the Ever After cannot supri—... Wait a moment. He... wasn't in the Ever After anymore. He was out. This was Remnant, and this storm was just a regular rainy one, not the existential nightmarish one.

This realization hit Jaune harder than any Boarbatusk ever could. He felt like an idiot, he ran across the forest in panic. He was scared, no... he was terrified of a little storm. Jaune got angry at himself. Why was he unable to understand? He was home. Why was he unable to leave the past behind? There was nothing he could have done about it. He tried his best as always. But his best was never good enough. People ended up dead.

Jaune fell back against the tree with tears in the corner of his eyes while he let out a long sigh. Why was he still punished? His two decades-long penance in hell was not enough? Maybe he should have listened to his father, he was not cut out to be a huntsman. He should have stayed home and never set a foot in Beacon.

Maybe they would still be alive.

---

An hour later the rain stopped and Jaune was able to move on. Unfortunately, he was a bit lost. Dashing madly through the forest was not a good idea. The path that he had followed was gods know where. His only hope was that his compass worked properly and that he didn't run too far. The general direction should be fine towards the northeast. There was a lake in that direction and according to the map, a small town next to it.

As Jaune walked he tried to come up with a plan for how to reach Vale the fastest. The best-case scenario would be a Bulkhead trip, but he was nowhere close to a city with a bullhead station. The other option would be a train trip. Unfortunately, the major train lines were sparse in this region, and they all avoided the thick southern forests. If he viewed things realistically then this journey going to involve a lot of walking.

Suddenly a big amount of water droplets fell on him, enough to drench his hair. Jaune sharply looked up and saw a big bird of prey that just left the leaf-rich branch above him. While he

cursed the overgrown pigeon, Jaune noticed a thin smoke column in the direction where the bird flew.

The town had to be nearby.

After ten minutes he reached the lake.

Its waters shimmered in the breeze, giving a distorted image of the trees which surrounded the lakeside. The trees were tall and lush which were home to many birds that were singing their song, no doubt trying to find their mate.

And on the other side stood Jaune's destination.

The town of Antlers.

The buildings were a pleasant mix of modern brick buildings in the inner districts and robust wood houses in the outer ones, protected by a tall stone wall which was divided by even taller towers. From this distance, the town appeared almost idyllic, a safe haven for any traveller like Jaune. A beacon of civilisation against the untamed wilderness of the Whispering Forest.

After a few minutes, as Jaune got closer to the gates, the smoky smell and the sounds intensified. The road was muddy and had *many* tires tracks and footprints in it. On the stone walls, above the gates, four guards stood. They wore light protective gears that would provide swift movement, but it would not give too much protection from heavy hits. In front of them, four miniguns were installed on the stone wall's edge. Jaune's eye caught signs that the towers that loomed over the walls, were housing some kind of automatic weapon system.

Interesting, unusually high-level heavy defences despite the settlement's size. He wondered what might have caused this.

When Jaune got close enough, one of the guards moved closer to the ledge, keeping his attention on Jaune. "Who goes there?"

"My name is Jaune Arc, huntsman."

"What do you want here, Jaune Arc?"

"I wish to buy supplies and stay a few days."

The guard studied him as much as he could, Jaune could see how carefully made his decision. They were wary. Why did they need that many heavy weapons? What spooked them? The walls were relatively pristine, no sign of damage from an attack, only the weather and time left their mark on it.

The guard turned around and talked silently with his comrades, they spoke a few words among themselves while glancing in Jaune's direction occasionally. The guard turned back towards Jaune. "You can enter, but do not cause any trouble here, we have enough problems already. Welcome to Antlers."

The town's thick steel gates slowly started to open up. Jaune gave a nod to the guard and moved inside.

The first thing he noticed was the people. Precisely, their numbers. There were too many people here. As Jaune walked further from the gates, the crowd size continued to grow. The people's faces looked tired, bleak, sad. Some of them wore dirty, in some cases torn clothes.

There was some space between the town and the walls, an empty field that they left for future expansion. Now, it wasn't vacant.

Dozens of tents were erected there. Many looked like emergency tents, some looked like they were used for camping with their bright colours, but most of the tents looked used and weathered. The one that appeared to be the medical tent was full, all the beds were occupied by injured people.

Jaune mind was running wild. What happened to these people? The town itself looked alright, no sign of damage or any kind of destruction. Then where did they come from?

Jaune felt a gentle tug on his sash. He looked down.

It was a little girl.

Her blonde hair was in mismatched twin tails. Her green eyes were staring at Jaune like he was the only one who could help her and solve all the world's problems. Her clothes were dirty. She had a few scratches on her face, but other than that she looked unhurt.

She couldn't be more than six.

"Have you seen my mommy?"

"I'm sorry?"

"My mommy, have you seen her? She said that we meet here but I can't find her."

Jaune looked around, maybe someone was looking for her. But it seemed that no one was looking for a child or calling someone's name frantically. He sighed and then asked the girl.

"When did you see her last time?"

"When the big monsters attacked. We had to run away, through the forest with the others but I couldn't find her or Daddy."

"Uuh, let's go and find them. Okay?"

She gave him a brief nod. Jaune reached his hand out which the little grasped almost immediately with her tiny hand. Jaune looked around with his head hoping someone was looking for her right now and she had just lost her mother here. When he saw no one, he signed. "What is your name?" Jaune asked gently.

"Mira."

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Mira. My name is Jaune.” he gave her an encouraging smile.

“Are you a huntsman?” She was looking at Crocea Mors.

“Yes, I am a huntsman.” Children often loved hunters and their stories. Stories about how they kill grimms, how they protect villages and save people. They are heroes and idols to many children across Remnant. How could they not? People who fight with extraordinary abilities against scary monsters with mechashift weapons. They whoop in and save the day. Who wouldn’t like that? But they never tell the horrible parts to the kids. When they arrived late, and the only things they could find were ash and blood.

“Just like Mommy and Daddy!” This gave Jaune a more optimistic mood. If Mira’s parents were hunters, then they had a pretty good survival chance. Hopefully, they made it here and they were looking for Mira.

“Just like them. Let’s go and find them.”

They headed to what for Jaune looked like some information point. Five stands were built next to each other and in front of them queues of people waiting for their turn. Refugees from the destroyed settlement. They looked tired, but they had enough energy to wait.

Jaune chose the shortest queue. He hoped that they had information about the pair of hunters. Hunters always were attention grabbers, whatever they liked it or not. In situations like this, the people always remain close to them for protection and leadership. He theorized that one of them led the main group of refugees to Antlers while the other was protecting the stragglers. At least he would do that. So, one of them had to be here.

After five minutes it was their turn. The man behind the stand looked tired like everyone else. He didn’t look up from his papers while he called them.

“What is your name and where do you come from?” He was still looking at his papers, waiting to write down the answers.

“Jaune Arc, but I’m not a refugee. I’m looking for this girl’s parents, according to her they are hunters. Do you know where they are?”

The man looked up to Jaune and then looked at Mira. “If they are here then they must be with the city watch’s captain. You can find him at the western gate, his office is there. Anything else?”

“No, thanks.” The man gave only a grunt for them then called for the next.

Fortunately, they quickly found the captain’s office. It was a tall building, towering over the wall. The barracks were next to it on the two sides. Not many people were there, they must have been at the refugee camp or on the walls around the town.

In front of the building, there was an open-sided tent in which several people stood around a table. Some of them were wearing the local militia’s uniform, the rest wore normal, civilian

clothes. But two people, a man and a woman had something that the rest didn't, mechashift weapons on their backs.

Hunters.

Jaune prayed in himself to some higher power that they were Mira's parents.

When they got close Mira shouted. "Daddy!"

Almost everyone at the table turned their attention to the little girl. The two hunters froze for a moment then. "MIRA!" shouted both and ran towards Jaune and Mira. The daughter started to run too, as much as her short legs allowed it. When they met, the parents fiercely locked their arms around the girl. Even this far Jaune could feel their happiness, a family reunited, unhurt. That brought a little smile to his face.

"They are the lucky ones." commented the captain at the heartfelt scene next to him. Jaune didn't notice him until now "Many people lost their family."

Jaune turned towards the captain and asked. "What happened exactly? How did so many people get here?"

The captain moved his attention from the family to Jaune then he nodded with his head sideways. They moved a bit away from the reunited family, out of their earshot.

"The refugees are hail from three different settlements. All of them were attacked by grimms. The earliest one was a bit over a week ago, a small pack of Grimm appeared out of nowhere middle of the night. Sadly, there was no hunter nearby and they didn't have that many weapons." he shook his head a bit. "The survivors went to the nearest village for help, a few days later that village was attacked as well, poor folks. According to them, it was a smaller horde. They hit fast. Luckily those two hunters lived there. The casualties were light, but they had to abandon the village to escort the survivors here. Along the way, they met another group whose home was also destroyed by the Grimm. They arrived in the early hours in the morning. We are on high alert now; all the guards are on the wall or helping in some other way. We even have volunteers to help. We are ready to defend ourselves if they show up here."

"You've put up heavy defences." stated Jaune, remembering the front gate.

"Aye, Antlers was a strategically important town during the Great War. The army had stored here heavy weapons if the town comes under attack from Mistral. Luckily this never came to pass, the war has ended, and they left the weapons here. They're certainly not the newest ones, but they do their job just as fine, and we have plenty of them. If the Grimm decides to attack us, we'll make 'em regret it."

The captain was certainly confident in their chances. So was Atlas. Jaune could only hope that Antlers wouldn't share the same fate as the flying city. They had enough weapons to field an army, but weapons only take you so far. Without someone behind it, they worthed nothing. He knew that during a battle many people would rather run for their life than fight. And if they run the defences could crumble which would cost everyone's life in the end.

“I hope you’re right but most importantly I hope that you won’t have to make them regret anything in the first place. A horde is no joke, no matter how many guns you have.”

“I’m not going to argue with that, but a leader must show confidence to his people, no matter how dire the situation might be. If their captain doesn’t believe in victory, then who will? Why should they fight when they could run away with their family.”

“Giving them false hope could be just as catastrophic.”

“Of course. But you forget something important, lad. False hope is better than no hope at all. If this is all they need to fight, then I’m happy to provide it to them.” the captain sighed and looked down at his feet. “My younger self would have punched his captain in the face if he had done something like this.”

“And now?”

“And now I know better. Burden of leadership. One of the many, at least.”

“Captain!” A guard appeared behind them with a notebook, he gave his superior a quick salute. “Sir, the meeting with the council will start in ten minutes.”

“Thank you, Jacob. I’ll be there.” The guard saluted again then left. The captain turned back to Jaune. “Well, mister...?”

“Arc”

“Well, Mr. Arc, I must take my leave. It was nice to meet you.” He gave Jaune his hand which he shook it. “Same here, Captain.” Before Jaune could step away the captain grabbed his shoulder.

“Don’t forget lad, no cause is lost if there is but one fool left to fight for it.” Jaune could only give him a nod before Antlers’s captain marched away.

*One fool. A fool.*

This hit closer than he liked it. After all, these two words could sum up Jaune’s life so easily. A fool, who thought that he could just cheat his way into one of Remnant’s most prestigious schools. A fool, who went to a combat school without any kind of training. A fool, who wanted to be a hero for selfish reasons. A fool, who lost so many things. A fool, who still was willing to fight.

Deep down, he knew that he wasn’t doing this for a noble reason. No. It was entirely a selfish thing. He just didn’t dare to admit it to himself. If he did then the illusion would disappear like breath on a mirror. And then what would remain? A broken old man in a young man’s body who was fighting a losing battle hoping that he was able to do this one thing right. Most of his life was a series of particular failures. Fall of Beacon. Mistral and Haven. Atlas and Mantle. Penny. Alyx. He had spent countless nights wondering if someone else had been in his place from the initiation, then perhaps things would have turned out differently. Someone more experienced, more competent. Someone *better*. He *stole* that place from someone

worthy. How many people would be still alive? They would be here, alive, but thanks to him they were dead. This was his chance to make things right somewhat.

A fool's hope for penance.

"Sorry sir. Are you alright?" asked someone beside him. It was a middle-aged woman in uniform. She looked concerned.

"Uh, yes. Sorry, I just zoned out for a minute." answered Jaune, hoping that it would be enough for her.

"Yeah, I could see that." she still held her concerned gaze on him. "Did you arrive with the refugees, sir?"

"Uh, no. I'm heading to Vale, just stopped here. Do you know an—" Jaune was interrupted by loud engine noises. Three Bullheads flew over them in formation. One a bit ahead while the other two flew dutifully on its two sides somewhat after it. They were all black which was a bit strange. Usually, they don't paint them black. Before the trio could disappear among the buildings during landing, Jaune noticed an emblem on their sides, but they were too far for him to properly see it.

"Who are they?" asked Jaune.

"The OSC."

"OSC?"

"Office of Security Coordination, OSC for short. They were created after the Grimm attack at the last Vytal Festival."

"What do they do?"

"Pass, all I know is that they sometimes show up after something happened, usually Grimm-related, ask questions then disappear as fast as they appeared. Well, according to the rumours, at least. Dealing with them is above my pay grade." explained the woman before she changed the subject. "You were asking about something before they showed up."

"Oh right. Do you know any good hotel nearby?"

"Hmm, there is one next to the mall, and they have Huntsman discount as well." she said with a smile.

"Thank you." smiled back Jaune and received a nod from the woman before she went away.

Getting some nice rest in a soft bed would be a divine gift for Jaune. He only slept in his sleeping bag since he left Searock, a bit over a week ago. He wished that he could have rented a room in every town he came across so far, instead of sleeping in the wilds on the chilly spring nights. But he didn't have the time for this. He couldn't just stop and look for an affordable hotel when instead he could go further for a few more hours. Time was not on his

side. When was it? It was running out slowly but surely, time that he needed. The time that he would win with this could be the difference between life and death.

But there was another thing.

He was short on money. They didn't get too much payment in Vacuo. The city had enough problems with the Atlesian refugees. Feeding, protecting and lodging that amount of people out of nowhere was not that easy, especially since Vacuo was never a rich kingdom. The hunters got little money from their jobs, but they were accommodated in Shade where they would get meals as well - thus they wouldn't need to spend on these for themselves. Jaune hoped that the room wouldn't cost too much even with the discount.

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He was broke.

Well, not entirely, but almost. The hotel was not only next to the mall. No, it was on the main street, next to a lot of fancy shops. This naturally pumped up his expenses – even with that minging three percent discount. He couldn't stay for another night. He needed more money because the little he had was only enough to buy a few days worth of food for his journey. After that, he would be forced to hunt which was time-consuming or starve a little which was dangerous. He had a solution though.

Huntsman job.

There were always Grimm-related problems almost everywhere or something else. And for these problems, a Huntsman was the most practical solution. That's why the kingdoms fund the academies after all. While the armed forces keep the cities safe with their automatic defence guns and air fleets, the Huntsmen and Huntresses keep the frontier settlements relatively safe from the Grimm and bandits.

The jobs varied from easy to extremely hard or suicidal, this highly depended on the issue's root cause. The ones connected to the Grimm depended on the Grimm's kind, class, and numbers. Human-related usually were the easy ones – except if it was a rogue Huntsman, that could become problematic. The rogues usually were dealt with by a whole Huntsmen team, it was easier that way.

Of course, this system wouldn't work without the rewards. The higher the risk, the higher the reward. The Lien was provided by the local kingdom because they were the ones who could afford it, a village barely could afford a hunter on their own.

However, the kingdoms only offered this money to those who were willing to join their rule.

That was the trick to the governments to expand their territory, without Huntsmen, the independent settlements were destined to fall. The hunters were a rare sight around these

villages because they rarely offered anything for them, of course they responded for emergencies but often they were too late for help.

Antlers belonged to Vale, therefore they should have a well-paying mission for passing hunters at the local office with a mission board. If fortune favoured Jaune, then he could get an easy mission with enough money that would be enough until the next town.

“Sorry, sir. We don’t have any active mission, right now.” said the blonde woman behind the desk. “Unfortunately for you, we didn’t have any Grimm that the local militia couldn’t handle on their own, and the last bandit sighting around here was three years ago.”

Jaune cursed his luck in himself. He had possibly managed to find the only town where there was no Hunters mission. “Are you sure? Nothing at all?”

“Sadly yes. The last mission was picked up two days ago by a Huntress, leading a small group of people to Vale. They left yesterday after they received their provision, before the storm.” The woman gave him a sympathetic look and continued, “Even if we had something, we couldn’t pay you right away. Our budget was redirected to the town’s militia after those villages were destroyed, not to mention providing shelter and food for the survivors. At best, we only could pay you next month.”

Jaune didn’t have a month to spare here or money.

“What about that Huntress? How will she get her payment?” asked Jaune.

“She’ll receive it when she has successfully led the people to Vale and checked in for it at the local officials. Vale most likely pays her immediately.”

Jaune sighed. This job would have been perfect for him. A simple escort mission to Vale. Looks like fate hated him more than anything.

If he hadn't been... frightened by the storm, he might have gotten here in time and managed to convince that Huntress to work together before she left with the group. He only missed them by a few hours.

*Wait*

They left only yesterday. They couldn't get that far. The group likely was made up of civilians – they’re not used to travelling at a fast pace, and there’s the storm yesterday, that definitely slowed them down, maybe even stopped them.

He could catch up with them.

Maybe they’re just a few hours a walk from here. He could meet up with them and convince them to let him join. Two hunters better than one, he wouldn’t even ask for payment, the Huntress could keep all of it. Just let him accompany them till Vale. From there, he would ask for help from Beacon’s Professors.

This could work but he must hurry.

He thanked the woman and left quickly.

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The thick vegetation of the forest around him started to thin out as he was getting higher on the hill. Since he heftily left Antlers, he has followed the road which – according to the guards, the group have used.

In the past three hours, while he jogged on his way towards the group, he tried to figure out what to say when he finally reached them.

He didn't want to come across as a bandit but most likely this will be their initial thought. A random man shows up claiming that he followed them from Antlers. Then they will inevitably notice his weapon, a bandit would only have a gun or something – something easily used, but someone with a sword would give them a worse thought. A rogue huntsman who wants to rob them or worse, and this will be the point where their Huntress joins in the conversation, probably violently if he can't defuse the situation by that point.

The best option would be to show them his Huntsman licence at the beginning, but they'd let him that close? He hoped that the situation wouldn't escalate quickly out of hand to the point where he had to use Croce Mors. A relatively relaxed conversation where he could explain to the group and that Huntress why he had followed them and why he wanted to join them would be the ideal scenario. Hopefully, his reasons will be good enough for them: a plus hunter to protect them, he didn't want money just a little food for his services. Not the most winning reasons but he would come up with something better before he catches up with them.

Jaune was almost at the top of the hill when he heard an explosion not far from him. When he reached the hilltop which was above the treeline, Jaune saw a column of black smoke rising among the trees a few hundred meters from him. Around the column, the trees were heavily moving and shaking.

Sounds of gunshots, roaring and screaming echoed through the distance.

Jaune started to run towards the fight. His leg pounded the ground so hard like never before. As he got closer and closer the gunshots and the screaming were lessened which could be a good thing or a horrible thing.

From the roaring Jaune guessed that the group had run into grimms, but the disappearing noises of the battle made him anxious, either grimms were dropping dead fast or the humans. The latter option made him run faster, but there was no beaten path between him and the group which made the navigation among the trees complicated.

The ground trembled from another and Jaune felt the shockwave as well. It come from close.

*He was almost there.*

When he got close to what appeared to be a clearing, he dropped his backbag and pulled out his broken sword as he dashed through the tree line.

A camp welcomed him, or what remained from it. There were maybe a dozen tents in a circular form, most of them were destroyed. They were either torn apart or burned down. As he went closer, he started to find the camp's residents – or what's left of them. Men's and women's bodies were scattered around the camp, rifles and shotguns were in their hands or near them – they didn't give up that easily. He could see a few grimms that didn't evaporate completely which meant that he missed the whole thing by mere minutes.

He was too late.

*Again.*

He could add another failure to the rest. It's like a never-ending cycle of hope and disappointment, for whenever he felt hopeful that he could help someone – to do his duty and job, would be replaced by the soul-crushing disappointment of failure, that he was not good enough again, that he failed *again*. When will it stop? Never? Was he sentenced to fail forever? When wi–

A clattering sound behind him broke Jaune out of his thoughts. One of the collapsed tents was moving. No, something inside the tent was moving. A grimm? Jaune slowly moved closer ready to strike with Crocea Mors if it was needed. When he was just a few meters away, he heard it.

Sniffing, it was quiet and small, but it was audible to Jaune. He froze for a moment. This wasn't a Grimm, someone was crying. Someone was *alive*. He was moving before he noticed it. He had to help whoever was under the destroyed tent.

Jaune stabbed his sword to the ground before he knelt in front of the brownish fabric. He didn't want to pull off the remaining of the tent too fast because he didn't want to scare further the already frightened person under it, but he didn't know that there were any Grimm nearby, so he had to do it quickly. He couldn't waste time, if they were hurt during the attack then every minute counted.

He pulled away the fabric, his own blue eyes met with a frightened teary blue pair. They belonged to a little girl who couldn't be more than eleven. Her shoulder-length raven black hair was messy and a bit dirty. Tears were running down on her cheeks from her bloodshot eyes. She looked absolutely terrified, trembling like an autumn leaf; she sat on the ground holding her legs to her chest, her gaze was firmly sat on him.

She reminded Jaune of one of his little sisters who had nightmares when they were little. Lavender often came over from her room to his to seek safety from monsters that scared her during the night. That her big brother would cast away the monsters from her room or she could stay in his till morning. The similarity started and ended there that this girl was scared and she needed help, here the monsters were real, not imaginary, and here he was a huntsman whose duty was to protect her and destroy her monsters. Here he could help her, save her.

“Hey.” he started softly to soothe her. “It’s alright, I’m here to help. My name is Jaune, I’m a huntsman, see.” he raised his arm slowly towards Crocea Mors. Her eyes followed his every move, she was still deathly scared. “What’s your name?” he tried to do everything slowly and gently to calm her down; to lower her guard so he could help her.

“They said that I mustn’t talk to strangers.” she said, her voice croaked.

He chuckled a little. “That’s true, but I told you who I am and what I do, so technically I’m not a stranger.” he tried to convince her. “You know, my mom always said that strangers are just friends you haven’t met yet, and she’s almost always right about everything.” he gave her a little smile. “And if you don’t say your name then I’m afraid that I have to give you one, and sadly on that front I’m really bad. So, what’s your name?”

“Thana. Thana Keres.” she answered timidly.

As far as Jaune could see Thana didn’t have any visible injury but he couldn’t be sure.

“It’s nice to meet you, Thana. Please tell me, did you get hurt?”

She shook her head which gave Jaune a little relief.

“Ok, that’s good. Can you tell –“

Jaune was cut off by a loud roar. He quickly turned around and grabbed Crocea Mors. The roaring came beyond the tree lines, he couldn’t see what caused it, he positioned himself between the roar and Thana to protect her. He could feel how the ground rumbling under his legs, the sound of trees falling in the distance was unmistakable, and it was getting closer.

“Thana listen to me! Do you see that big oak tree on your left side? The one with the thick trunk.”

“Yes.” replied Thana.

“When I say run, you run there and hide behind it.” Jaune still faced toward the source of the roaring which was getting closer and closer. “No matter what you hear, you stay there! If I’m not there in five minutes, then you start running towards that big hill behind you. There will be a road, from there you’ll see a lake, go that direction and you will be back at Antlers.” Jaune could see how the canopy of trees was moving wildly. “No matter what you hear or see, you mustn’t stop! Do you understand me?” pressed Jaune.

“Y-Yes.”

He hoped that she had truly understood it because he had no idea what was coming to here, but one thing was certain – it was big.

Jaune’s grip on Crocea Mors was tight, every muscle in his body was ready for his commands, he felt like his heart wanted to jump out of his chest. The cracking of the falling trees was as loud as the sound of the lightning.

He was ready.

There was a big roar then a black thing flew from among the trees and landed not far from him. It took a for moment Jaune to realize what was it. It was the Huntress who escorted the group to the city of Vale, she too was still alive. Jaune couldn't see her properly because she wore a black travel cloak which completely covered her from head to toe as he lay on her stomach, she tried to get up, but she fell back to the ground. He wanted to run to her to check on her, but before he could have moved, a mighty roar took all of his attention.

A big black creature emerged from the forest. Its big, clawed paws left deep marks in the soil, black fur and bone-like spines covered it except its feathery wings. The Grimm's body resembled a lion thanks to the large crown-like mane of white bone, a pair of massive bull horns adorned its skeleton skull. On the Grimm's other side, there was a scorpion tail, waiting to sting its victim.

It was a manticore.

Jaune hadn't seen one in decades, the last time he fought one was in Atlas's final days, and before that on Argus Limited. He knew that despite the size manticores are rather agile, in the air fast enough to catch up with an express train. The scorpion tail was obviously venomous, and deadly. And if he remembered correctly, they had a nasty habit of breathing fire. Fantastic.

The manticore finally took notice of him and looked like it was ready to charge at him at any moment, but he rather took the initiative.

“Thana run!”

Thana started to run to her hiding place behind the oak tree as he sprinted towards the Grimm. He wanted the manticore's undivided attention solely for himself. This way Thana was somewhat safe, and Huntress had some time to get up.

The manticore didn't move until Jaune got near it, he tried to position himself between the Grimm and the Huntress to protect her from further harm. When Jaune was in striking distance, the Grimm leapt in action and turned its body to sting Jaune but missed him by a few inches. The knight on the other hand was able to slash the manticore across its back while he jumped over it, when he landed the black creature let out an angry roar and tried to use its horns to stab Jaune.

He managed to block it with his shield but the manticore attack was strong enough to blow him against a nearby tree. Fortunately, his aura protected him from most of the harm, but he certainly felt the impact as the tree shuddered into the impact.

Jaune knew that with a broken blade, he couldn't take on a manticore, it was simply too short to kill it in one attack. Thankfully he had an idea.

“That's all you got, you overgrown fleabag.” Jaune taunted the grimm as if it understood what he was saying. The said fleabag let out a mighty roar and charged at Jaune.

Maybe it understood him.

Jaune had rolled out the way before the mantichore could have used him as a decorative element on its horn.

The tree was not so lucky. The mantichore hit the tree with so much force – where in front Jaune had stood moments before, that the tree snapped in two.

“Hah, you missed me, fatso!” gloated Jaune.

Maybe it actually understood him because Jaune would have sworn that the Grimm snapped its head at him and looked really pissed.

The mantichore took a wider stance and took a deep breath, then shot a beam of fire out of its mouth. Jaune had fallen to his back and let the fire pass above him. He shut his eyes. The heat stung the skin on his face a little, and the roaring of the fire dominated his hearing, shutting out the rest of the world for moments.

When the flames passed, he opened his eyes and rolled aside as he felt the trembling ground under him – the mantichore was charging at him again.

He didn't know how long he could keep evading the attacks, he had to end this. Luckily, it was almost ready. While Jaune kept avoiding the mantichore's attacks, he could concentrate on channelling his aura to Crocea Mors. He had read about this in Atlas and managed to accomplish this technique in Ever After. Aura Slash, was when someone channels a part of his aura into his weapon and releases it to create a powerful arc of aura. This was the only way that he could kill the Grimm with his broken sword which now emanated a faint white glow, like the colour of his aura. At the next charge, he would end this.

The mantichore had another idea sadly.

It was now closer to the Huntress who was still lying unconscious on the ground than to Jaune. Looked like it had changed its target to an easier one and started to run towards her.

At this, Jaune leapt to action as well. He sprinted after the Grimm, he ran as fast as his muscles were able to push him. Adrenalin was running through his veins, time seemingly slowed down, he prepared himself to let the aura out of his sword.

The mantichore was almost at her when he decided to end this. As he swung Crocea Mors, the white light left the sword and turned into a brilliant white arc which travelled towards the mantichore. The black monster leapt into the air to jump onto the Huntress and end her life, but before it could do it, the white arc slashed the Grimm in half. Its parts flew over her and almost immediately started to turn into black smoke when they landed.

He did it.

Finally, he was able to save people, to be someone's hero. He knew that he shouldn't think like that, but he was too eager to take this victory because he was beyond happy, he was ecstatic. He was a bit winded, but he let out a little chuckle. He couldn't celebrate just yet, he needed to check on his colleague who was still unconscious and collect Thana. She had to be terrified.

“Thana, you can come out now.” Thana’s head appeared from behind the tree’s trunk as Jaune called for her. “It is over, it can’t hurt you anymore.”

Jaune dropped his sword and shield to the ground and knelt down next to the Huntress to see her injuries and heal her with his Semblance.

In the following weeks after they had returned to Remnant, he had some trouble with his Semblance. It hadn’t worked reliably. Sometimes it had worked fine, sometimes less effective, and other times hadn’t worked at all, no matter how hard he had tried. He hoped that he even had enough aura to help her, his Aura Slash was an overkill which cost him a large chunk of aura.

The Huntress was lying face down on the grassy ground in her black travel cloak which still covered her entirely. Jaune had seen her move before the manticore appeared, so he knew that she was still alive. The lack of blood around her gave him some relief.

Jaune grabbed her right shoulder to turn her on her back carefully. The cloak’s hood moved away and revealed her face. The blood in Jaune’s veins turned to ice, his entire being froze, like he was just an observer in his own body. He felt some kind of pressure in his chest which he couldn’t identify but he didn’t care. The triumph that he had felt earlier disappeared like a dream in the morning.

The unnamed Huntress whose job was to protect these people until they reached Vale was not a stranger to him, he knew her. He knew her name, who she was, what had she done to everyone, *to him*. He had dreamt about her many times. Usually, she was his tormentor, a voice that always taunted him with his mistakes, a monster who was about to kill him among joyous laughs; but often their roles were reversed, those dreams scared him sometimes. Would he be able to do it, to kill her, to become someone like her?

It appeared he was about to find out.

Because Cinder Fall was laid right before him.

Her raven black hair appeared to be longer than the last time he had seen her. She was a bit paler, no doubt because of the fight with the manticore. Her eyepatch which usually covered her left eye was missing, her hair mostly hid her face’s left side, but the scar was visible if someone focused on it. Her face was strangely calm and peaceful, no sign of her signature smug smirk which she always wore at every encounter.

Her breathing was shallow and short, a thin layer of sweat covered her exposed skin, maybe her paleness wasn’t from the fight. Jaune eyes wandered to her right arm where her clothes were torn, she had a cut on her upper arm. It wasn’t a deep one but looked bad, her red blood was slowly flowing out of the wound with some purplish liquid. The veins near the wound started to appear clearly under her skin. Was it venom? What could –

The manticore.

It must have stung her with its scorpion tail during their fight. But why were they fighting? They’re on the same side, both of them served Salem. Why was she escorting these people?

This didn't make any sense for Jaune. But it didn't matter, whatever her plan was he could end this here and now.

His body slowly thawed from its previous frozen state and his arm found Crocea Mors's hilt. The ancient sword felt heavier than ever before as he lifted it up from the grass. He rested the sword in his lap.

He didn't know how many times he had wondered about this moment as a young man when she was finally at his mercy. A part of him thought that this day would never come. He always thought that there would be a battle between them that he wouldn't survive, back then he was fine with it, he wanted revenge more than anything.

Now, it would be strangely easy.

A single move and she would be dead.

Jaune slowly started to raise Crocea Mors from his lap. A thousand thoughts were running across his mind, mostly about those people who were dead because of her. When his mind reached Pyrrha, his hand stopped mid-air. He remembered why she had died.

*The Fall Maiden.*

Pyrrha would have been the next host for the Maiden powers. The powers which go to someone else when its current host dies. If the current Maiden didn't choose an inheritor, then the power would go to a woman who was in the right age. If Jaune kills Cinder now, the power of the Fall Maiden would go to a random woman.

He would curse a total stranger with this power. Salem and her minions were hunting the Maidens. He would basically sign someone's death warrant with Cinder's death. She would be hunted until they found her, from there she would have two choices: join or die.

"Are you going to hurt her?" asked a timid voice.

Jaune looked to his left. Thana stood there, watching him. She was hugging a plush toy to her chest.

"N-No." answered Jaune with a shaken voice. He was surprised because he had forgotten about Thana entirely for a minute, he hadn't even noticed her until now. He saw that she was eyeing his sword which was raised at the same height as his head, when he noticed this, he immediately lowered his arm.

Gods, what was he thinking? He almost killed someone in front of a kid. What's wrong with him?

"I just... need to cut her shirt at her wound to see her injury." He tried to give Thana a believable answer, the last thing he needed now that Thana run off to somewhere because she thought he was a bad man. "See?" said Jaune as he cut the fabric at the wound and put down Crocea Mors.

Thana slowly moved closer to see it. "Are you going to heal her?"

Was he?

This woman was Cinder Fall, the Fall Maiden, one of Remnant's most wanted. She was responsible for countless deaths and unprecedented destruction across the world. Leaving her alive would be a stupid thing to do. Healing her? Downright crazy. But he couldn't kill her in front of a little girl, and he was close to being crazy anyway.

“Yes, I can heal her with my Semblance. You know what's a Semblance, right?” Thana gave him an uncertain nod. She probably only heard about it, but she didn't know exactly what it was.

Jaune hovered his hand above the wound, he hesitated. He was unsure whether this was the right thing to do or not. He dreaded to think what the consequences of this would be.

Thana still watched him, waiting to see his Semblance. Jaune made his decision, hopefully, the right one.

He put his hand on the wound, the other one to her stomach. He closed his eyes and concentrated. His aura started to flow from across his body to his arms which caused his hands to shine in white, then Cinder's aura flared up in orange colour, first close to his hands, then slowly spread across her whole body.

His Semblance – due to its nature – let Jaune to feel someone's aura. He could approximately tell a person's aura level when he used it. Right now, it was a giant void that he felt inside her. What little aura she had was weak, desperately tried to heal her wounds, with his help the process would accelerate.

The wound's edges on her arm started to coalesce, but after some point, it stopped, no matter how much aura he had given to her. He almost ran out of aura when he decided to stop. The manticore's venom wasn't allowing him to close the cut.

*Damn it.*

She needed a doctor, fast. They had to go back to Antlers, there should be a doctor, maybe even a hospital.

He scooped her up carefully into bridal style. She was lighter than he had expected, he ensured her head rested against his chest, her body supported securely against his own. Even through his armor, he could feel how warm she was.

*She must have a fever.*

“Thana.” Jaune called, “We have to go back to Antlers, she needs a doctor.”

“Will Miss Cinder be okay?”

“Uh yes, of course. But we need to hurry. That won't be a problem, right?”

She shook her head.

“Alright then. Let’s go.”

## Chapter End Notes

Hello there.

A bit late but I’m here with a new chapter. Sorry for the delay, I was a little busy lately, but you get a long chapter in exchange, the longest one yet. Our main characters finally meet, sort of.

Hope you’ll like it.

Fun fact for the last chapter: the Malaluxes (Mala lux) means bad light(s) in Latin. The creatures had no name in the series, and I thought that this would a good one.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

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

Darkness.

Unending, eternal darkness.

There was nothing here. Nothing... notable, not even the usual sense of gravity. It was like... flying. Or just being underwater? It was hard to decide. She was just... existing.

What a strange feeling.

Not warm or cold, but it was pleasant.

She could get used to this.

Then, like everything good, came to an end.

A constant sound disturbed this lovely realm. At first, it was a deep sound, barely hearable, like... humming. But later it increased into a higher note, it was sharper, more audible. The sound that was once a constant, now became a rhythmic beeping, an annoying one at that.

Then she was cold. Why? This was supposed to be a nice place, she thought at least.

Someone was ruining this place.

This was the only explanation.

Then the endless darkness didn't appear to be endless anymore. Slowly it started to turn brighter, from black into dark grey, from dark grey into a lighter shade, from that into white.

The white started to hurt her eyes as it became brighter and brighter. It was like someone turned on hundreds of reflectors and focused all of it on her.

The light was so strong that she was sure that she wasn't actually seeing it anymore.

After seconds later, the light lost its intensity. Her vision returned, the once empty space was not so empty now. In front of her, there was a... fluorescent lamp. No, it was above her.

She was no longer hovering in a dark place but lying in a bed.

The constant beeping sound was still there, it was coming somewhere from her left side. She would check it but didn't have the energy to look at it, maybe she didn't have the will either. She felt so tired.

She was still cold despite she was under a blanket.

Where was she? Why did she feel weak?

“Oh, you’re awake, wonderful!” A brown-haired woman walked in her line of vision. She wore pale blue nurse clothes that allowed her long slender tail freedom. It was covered in short yellow fur with black spots which had a slightly bushy appearance at the tip. It looked like a cheetah's tail. “You gave us quite a fright.” Her cheerful tone made Cinder automatically dislike her, in her experience cheerful people, like this woman, were mostly annoying.

“Where am I?” croaked out Cinder.

“Wait dear.” said the woman and stepped away, moments later she returned with a glass of water. “Here, this will help.” Cinder gladly accepted the water and then repeated her previous questions. “Where am I?”

“In the Hospital of Antlers.”

“What happened?” She remembered that they had stopped in a clearing because of the storm and waited there until it passed but the night was too close to continue their track, so they had stayed there for the night. Then the morning came... roaring... and screaming.

“You had a nasty run-in with a Manticore not far from here in the forest. Maybe with a few others too, judging by your injuries. Anyway, the Manticore managed to sting you during your fight with it, but don’t worry, the antidote was administrated in time. You will get better soon.” explained the nurse.

“A manticore?” asked Cinder. One couldn’t have defeated her, there must have been more Grimm, maybe a whole horde.

“That, along with whatever else were with it. Your injuries were extensive. Three cracked ribs, a dislocated shoulder, concussion, bruised wrist, a broken toe, and of course the manticore venom which led to a strong fever.” listed the faunus. “Most of it was easy to deal with and healed fast thanks to your aura but the venom was the one which was giving you a hard time, the fever took you out for a few days.”

“How long?”

“Three days.” answered the nurse.

Three days. Damn it. She wanted to get to Vale as soon as possible. Three days had been completely wasted.

“How did I get here?” she had no recollection of getting back here, certainly not with these injuries. She had some recollection, flashes of dead Grimms, a few Ursa, but nothing about the manticore.

“Your partner brought you here.” she said with a smile.

...

...

“... my partner?”

“Yes. He brought you here in his arms, like a knight with his lady. He was running with you all the way to here, barely able to tell what happened with you.”

...*What?*

“He wouldn’t let you out of his sight even after you were stabilised. Most of the time he was here, sitting in that armchair and waiting for you to wake up.” The nurse gave her a teasing smile. “You got quite a catch there, don’t let him go.” she giggled at the end.

What the hell was she talking about? Cinder never had a partner. She took this pitiful job all on her own. Who was she talking about?

“I don’t know who you are talking about.”

“Oh, you must have hit your head harder than we thought, otherwise you wouldn’t forget about your blondie.”

“What blonde!?” exclaimed Cinder. She was at the end of her patience. If the faunus didn’t start making sense, then she would make her regret it. The beeping from her side was getting louder.

“The blonde with white streaks in his hair, gorgeous blue eyes, tall, around 20, handsome, wearing armor like a knight. Still nothing?”

Cinder still had no idea who was the nurse talking about. Blonde with white streaks, wearing armor. She had no associate who fit this description. The only person who came remotely close was...

“Do you know his name?” asked Cinder calmly, like she was asking about the weather. She dreaded her answer. No, this person was not *him*, absolutely not! She tried to convince herself. What would he do here anyway?

“I don’t.” Cinder let out a breath that she didn’t know she was holding. “I didn’t catch his full name. John? Jon? Hm, something like that.” said the brown-haired faunus uncaringly. Meanwhile, Cinder froze up in realization.

In that moment the room’s door began to open.

“And here he is, the very topic of conversation. I’ll leave you two alone a little and tell the doctor that you have woken up.” said the nurse as she and the newcomer exchanged their place in the room and the door closed with a click.

The only sound in the room was the steady beeping of the heart monitor. The tension in the air was practically touchable.

It a steady pace, he slowly moved to the armchair that the faunus nurse mentioned at the window, the one where he had spent most of his time, guarding her like a warden. The attire was the same as last time, white armor trimmed with gold, underneath high collar black shirt, dark navy jeans and dark brown boots, and *that* red sash. The only difference that she could detect on him now was the snow-white streaks in his blonde hair. Where did those come from? Stress? A fashion statement?

As he took his steps, his eyes never left hers, not even when he took his place in the armchair. This made her uneasy.

Something was not right about him.

He was different than the last time she had seen him, not in appearance of course but in demeanour. He was calm. He was never calm when they met. Their encounters were always intense, full of righteous hate and murder intent on his part. At least these were the most prominent patterns that she noticed in their last two meetings.

Now he just sat there and calmly watched her. Where was the rage? Where was the shouting? Why didn't he kill her while she was unconscious? Instead, he saved her and spent the last three days here, watching her.

"How are you?" he asked as if she was not his greatest enemy.

"You tell me... *partner*."

"They only let family members stay in the patient's rooms, but for Huntsman and Huntresses this is expanded to their partners." he explained.

"And how did you prove that we are partners?"

"Didn't need to, they haven't asked for proof. Guess when a Huntsman brings in a Huntress, they just assume that they're partners or at least they know each other."

"Sloppy work from them, but lucky for you."

"Indeed."

Silence again.

She hated this. She hated this entire situation. She hated how calm he was.

"Nikos must be spinning in her grave." she didn't know why she wanted to anger him. "Well, I'm not sure she has a grave. There wasn't much left from her to be buried." She thought this would work on him, that girl was important to him.

"If you're trying to anger me, then it isn't working." She had to agree with him, he didn't appear even agitated, just unimpressed. *Why?*

She remained silent.

“If you are finished then I have some questions for you. First of all, why do you lead the Grimms to attack settlements?” he asked with an even face. The question was unexpected for Cinder.

“I don’t. They’re Grimm, destroying and killing is what they do, and they do that on their own. They don’t teach this stuff in those academies for you or are you just a moron?” he didn’t answer. He just continued watching her like a hawk, probably looking for a sign of lies.

“Why did you try to escort those people to Vale?”

“Why should I answer to you? I don’t need to explain myself to the likes of you!” she stated heatedly.

“You *will* answer to me because what do you think will happen when I tell them who you are? You gave them a fake name when you took the mission. I wonder what will happen when I inform them: Cinder Fall is here and injured, you know, the woman who had killed thousands of people.”

They would kill her right here without warning if they had any senses. Minimal casualties on their side but she would be damned if she made it easy for them. She may be injured but she could bring down this building and kill most of the people here. But she had no desire to die here, not now when she decided that she had enough.

“I needed the money... to restart.” she admitted hesitantly.

That made the fool to froze. He did not expect this. He obviously tried to control his face, but Cinder could see the slightly widened eyes, how his eyebrows moved up a little, how he started to stare with a blank look. He had to be deep in his shallow mind. How amusing. She could practically hear how the few gears in his head were turning, trying to connect the dots, figuring out whether she was lying or not. What’s going to be?

“Where is your arm?”

---

“I needed the money... to restart.”

... What?

Restarting?

Did she want to restart? *She?* Cinder Fall?

Impossible!

He must have heard it wrong.

This had to be a lie. Had to be! In past couple of days, he had been thinking why she was here and why she was trying to help those people. The most logical conclusion that had come up was that she was attempting to get into Vale or near Beacon. While it was the most reasonable, it didn't explain everything. She could have easily sneaked into the city without too much trouble with her abilities, Vale didn't have the same kind of defences as Atlas had which she had bypassed somehow. Flying there was faster, easier, and more comfortable than shepherding a bunch of civilians there for weeks while protecting them from Grimm.

And the Grimm.

This was maybe the most puzzling for Jaune. The Grimm attack in the forest. If she tried to sneak into Vale by pretending to be a Huntress, then why the Grimm attacked them or her? He had thought this was maybe a planned attack to build some credibility for herself in the eyes of the group. But this was unlikely, she would have won that easily, she should have. No, this was not planned.

This whole thing was too strange.

One piece was missing from this puzzle before. But now he had it:

Restarting.

This implied that she was no longer in Salem's employment. This also explains another thing that would have been problematic when he showed up with her in the hospital. Something that was missing since the last time they had met.

"Where is your arm?"

She stiffed at that, her eye widened slightly, almost impossible to notice if he wasn't watching her reaction closely.

Then her head turned until she could glance at her left arm, at least what was left of it. There was nothing under her elbow.

Jaune had almost forgotten about her Grimm arm when he had arrived back at Antlers with her. He had to stop for a moment to figure out how to hide it, wrapping her own travel cloak around would have been his choice, but when he was about to do it, he noticed that it had been missing.

The end of her association with the Grimm Queen was probably the reason.

She stared at her slightly reddish stump, maybe it was an after-effect of the Grimm flesh, then her face became hard and looked at him with an angered eye.

"Where are your friends?" Her voice was soaked with hatred.

She clearly didn't want to answer for him and chose to attack back with her own uncomfortable question.

But knowing this didn't make it less hurtful for Jaune.

“Where they need to be.” She continued to watch him, her anger slowly evaporating from her face and her gaze to her other arm where the IV and the heart monitor were connected. He could tell that she was thinking about something, she wasn’t the kind of person who held back whatever she wanted to say.

“How many?” she asked eventually.

“How many what?”

“The refugees. How many survived?”

This talking was becoming stranger by the minute. Cinder was concerned about others, that’s definitely new. Jaune didn’t know where to put that. “Why do you care?” Indeed, why

“Just answer!”

“... One.”

There was a passing emotion on her face, barely noticeable and it disappeared as fast as it appeared, but it was there. Almost looked like... sorrow.

“Who was it?” her voice sounded small.

“A little girl. She said her name is Thana. She got only a few scratches.” She nodded at his answer and looked somewhat relieved.

What happened to her that changed her so much? The Cinder Fall that Jaune knew was cruel, ruthless, someone who would never help others unless she had something to gain. Yet here they were, she visibly unhappy from the news that only one person survived from the group that she should have protected until they reached Vale.

“Why did you save me?” she asked. Her question knocked him out of his thoughts. He assumed that at some point this question would be asked.

“Because I chose to.” his answer was curt, but he had no desire to explain himself to her at the moment. His answer must have left her unsatisfied because she gave him an intense glare.

She was about to retort when the door opened. The nurse returned with the doctor.

“We’re back! I hope we didn’t interrupt anything.” said cheerily the faunus nurse, wiggling her brows at them.

“No, you didn’t.” assured her Jaune. “We’re just... catching up about the happenings of the past couple of days.”

“Well, in that case, I introduce myself to my patient. Hello Ms. Ella, I’m Doctor Oakheart and I will be your doctor for the duration of your stay.” introduced himself to the doctor. Jaune had met with the doctor when they stabilised Cinder, he was the one who gave him information about her condition on the first day. He appeared to be a nice fellow to Jaune. He was in his late forties, cleaned shaved, his once brown hair had started to turn grey in a few

places. “I wish to do a few examines to see how your healing is going, if that's okay with you Ms. Ella.”

After a moment Cinder gave him a careful nod.

“Excellent!” then he turned to Jaune. “Mr. Arc would you step out for a bit, until we are finished?”

“Of course.” Jaune said and stood up. “I go and get us some food; you must be hungry after three days.” he said to Cinder. “I won’t go far.” Jaune gave her one final glance which carried an unsaid message and left.

---

His talk with Cinder was interesting. If she told the truth, then many things changed in this war.

Salem lost one of her most dangerous assets. From killing the previous Fall Maiden to the fight in the Central Location, Cinder proved that she was a force to reckon with. She was one of the most powerful Huntress-level fighter Jaune had ever met, and the Maiden powers were only an addition to this. She incorporated these powers into her fighting style heavily, creating weapons and projectiles, flying and throwing fireballs. She was able to kill Ozma in his prior reincarnation who had millennia worth of battle experience, laid low two great kingdoms, and the list went on.

Losing Cinder hindered Salem’s side capabilities. They had to find a new candidate for the Summer Maiden power if the current one didn’t want to join on their quest to destroy the world which he was willing to bet was harder since the whole world knew about the Maidens, Salem, and the Relics. This would be a time-consuming effort, but he and everyone else would welcome this greatly, especially him. Getting to Vale on foot and *then* searching for the crown were not easy or fast tasks, and for the others in Vacuo and Vale gave time to muster up stronger defence.

The burden on Jaune's shoulder seemed to ease a bit.

There was a tiny light at the end of the tunnel.

But what should he do with Cinder?

She said she wanted to restart. How someone like her could do that, after all that she had done? Was it even the whole truth or just a part of it? The missing arm, the Grimm attack, the fact that she was here in an unimportant town supported her claims so far. But these didn’t help Jaune to decide.

Should he choose the easy way or the right way?

The easy way would be to kill her while she was weak. Logical. In the past, he would have chosen that, he would have danced at this chance. But now, not so much. He just didn't feel that anger anymore, he just felt tired.

And the right way? He wasn't sure what was it.

He was willing to believe to her.

Her reaction to his question about her missing Grimm arm was what tipped the scale. She had attacked back. If it was a trick, she would have given him some form of answer or half-truths. There was no prepared answer because she didn't expect to meet someone who knew her or about the arm. And he believed that she had nothing to do with the recent attack in the area. The opposite just didn't click into the picture.

He wondered why now she changed her mind about this whole thing. Undoubtedly, they were winning the war, there was little that anyone could do to stop Salem, especially after losing at Atlas.

However, his pondering came to an end when he reached his destination.

A food truck at the hospital's parking lot.

It was a relatively good place and most importantly, it was cheap. He discovered this place after he had eaten out all the sandwiches from the hospital's automata.

They sold burgers, fries, hotdogs, and a few other fast foods. He was usually able to get here before the crowd, but he arrived a bit later than usual because of his talk with Cinder. The line was too long for his liking, he didn't want to leave Cinder alone for too long now she was awake. He didn't think that she would do something stupid, but he didn't want to try his luck.

"Excuse me, are you Jaune Arc?" asked someone behind him.

Jaune turned around and met a woman in her late thirties who was carrying two pizza boxes with her. She had brown hair which was in a neatly done bun. She wore an outfit that Jaune would have associated with a teacher, a brownish long skirt and white blouse.

"Uh, yes." said Jaune confused.

"Hello, my name is Judy Hill. I work in the temporary refugee camp; I help out with the children there." Jaune gave an affirmative nod to her. "Yes, uh and there was someone there who wanted to see you." she gave him a tiny smile and looked behind her. "Come out, dear. Don't be this shy."

From behind Judy Hill, a familiar face appeared who had been hiding behind the older woman's skirt.

"Hello Thana." greeted Jaune. He hadn't seen her since he took her back to the camp a few days ago, it seemed the best option to him since he didn't know where he should take her.

Thana gave him a little wave with her hand, still hiding behind the woman's long skirt. She looked better than last time. Her black hair was pulled back into a ponytail, her blue eyes seemed to be a bit brighter than the last time.

"She wanted to come here to see you two." said Ms. Hill.

"Two?"

"You and that Huntress who you saved. I don't know if she woke up yet, but I know the hospital food isn't so great, so we brought you and her something definitely better." she raised the two pizza boxes a bit higher.

"Uh yes, thank you very much. She just woke up an hour ago, but I'm sure she will be glad for a few slices." said Jaune while he took the boxes. "And I'm sure she'll be happy to see you, Thana." Thana smiled a bit at this. He wasn't very sure about this, but he didn't want to cause any unwanted attention for them.

By the time Jaune and his companions reached Cinder's room, Dr. Oakheart had already finished his examination and just left the Cinder's room.

"Ah, Mr. Arc, excellent timing. I just finished; your partner will make a swift recovery. I believe we can discharge her within a few days."

"That's... good to hear, doctor." It was strange for Jaune to acknowledge this about her in a positive way. He felt even stranger when the hospital workers referred to her as his partner, an unpleasant feeling ran through his body every time.

The doctor bid his farewell to the group and left them in the corridor. Before they could have entered the room, Ms Hill's scroll started to ring with a catchy tune.

"Excuse me, I have to pick this up. You just go ahead; I will join you later."

Jaune turned to Thana as Ms. Hill left them to answer her scroll. "Alright then, let's see how she is doing."

Jaune opened the door and let the two of them in. Cinder was still in the bed. She just spared him a glance for a second then her attention turned entirely to Thana. She seemed... happy to see the girl. Thana walked past Jaune and went to Cinder's bed.

"Hi Miss Cinder, are you feeling better?" she asked timidly her from the bedside. Jaune noticed she appeared to be a little braver around Cinder, here or at the clearing in the forest when he healed her. He wondered why.

Cinder regarded her and Jaune for a moment, she seemed a bit uncertain, like she didn't know what to say. "Hello, Thana. I'm feeling a bit better, thank you." a moment later, "And how about you?"

Thana smiled shyly. "I'm okay."

“That’s good to hear.” Cinder replied, her voice warmer than Jaune had ever heard it. It was almost unsettling to see this side of her, a far cry from the ruthless woman he had come to know. He cleared his throat, drawing Cinder’s attention back to him.

“Thana and her caretaker brought us some pizza.” said Jaune, setting the pizza boxes on the small table beside her bed. “They thought we might be hungry.”

“And save you from the hospital food! It’s bad.” added Thana instantly.

“Thank you.” said Cinder as she spared a brief look at the boxes. “Would you… like some? I don’t think I could eat that much now.”

Thana looked at her for a moment then gave her a quick small nod.

For Jaune, this whole scene felt surreal. What had happened with Cinder? Why she was kind towards Thana? It was kind of some kind of elaborate plan to lower his guard? He didn’t feel this confused for a long time.

“Will you stand there and stare for the whole time like a fool or are you going to sit down and eat your part?”

Jaune looked at Cinder. Amber and blue met, both were full of distrust, both of them tried to kill the other a few times. She killed or hurt the people that he cared about, he foiled her chance to get the Winter Maiden power, and he almost killed her at Haven. He might have believed her, but he didn’t trust her. He was sure that she would get rid of him as soon as she could. Some kind of conflict between them was inevitable. Thana being here was perhaps the sole reason that they weren’t shouting at each other. Both of them were playing nice, for now at least.

He walked to the table where the boxes were and picked up the top one, then sat down in the armchair at the window. Cinder’s eye followed his every movement until he took his seat and started to eat his own pepperoni slices. She continued to watch him for a few seconds, then she scooted over a little on the bed to offer a spot for Thana at the edge.

The somewhat tense silence that fell on them while they ate disappeared when Ms. Hill entered the room.

“I see you’ve all settled in nicely. It’s good to see you awake, Miss Ella. I see that we didn’t pick something bad for you.” said Ms. Hill with a smile.

“No, you didn’t. Thank you.” said Cinder. Jaune thought that Cinder’s kindness that she had shown since he’d returned might be a show for him, a false image from Cinder to show him that she had changed, that she was no longer a threat. She must have thought that he was very gullible, that a few kind words would be enough to his opinion of her.

Or this whole thing was a play for the others. They would be harder to convince about who she was if they only saw her as a nice person.

“Don’t mention it. Anyway, I have a message for the two of you.”

“From whom?” asked Jaune.

“From the mayor, she wishes to see you and your partner when she is discharged.” elaborated Ms. Hill

“Why?” asked Cinder.

“I don’t know.”

## Chapter End Notes

Well, I'm not entirely happy with the last scene but I couldn't put my finger why. The chapter was mostly done in the past two weeks but that scene gave a bit of trouble for me, I hope it's okay-ish. And for those who like silentknight: I posted a oneshot about them, check it out if you're interested.

What do you think about the chapter?

## Chapter 6

It took Cinder two more days to recover enough to be discharged from the hospital. They wanted to keep her in for another day, but Cinder was adamant, and Dr. Oakheart saw it better to let her leave rather than argue with her.

The two days were rather dull for Jaune since he had decided to stay near Cinder to keep her supervised. She was not great fan of this. It was easier to guard her while she was unconscious, but now it was rather difficult. The mutual distrust and dislike had created a tense feeling in the hospital room. There were a few attempts from his part to get more information out of her, but she quickly had shut him down constantly. Uneasy silence reigned in the room for the better part of the first day until Cinder had enough and ordered Jaune out the room, claiming that she needed rest, and she couldn't do it with him in the room. At first, he didn't want to comply for obvious reasons, but she had threatened him that she will have the nurse to throw him out. Jaune had reluctantly fulfilled her request and take a seat outside on the corridor next to the room's door.

The chairs were made of cheap plastic which made them to be incredibly uncomfortable after a certain period of time – not like he could have slept; he was still tried to process what she had said to him. When the information had settled in his mind, he wanted to call up his friends to inform them about this, but when the scroll was in his hand, he remembered that he had turned it off on the ship before he reached Searock.

He still didn't want to turn it back on. He had an unrealistic fear that even this far from Vacuo he would have received all those messages and missed calls. He had wondered what those messages would contain. He tried to imagine them, but he was a bit unsure how accurate his memories were about his friends. How many things that he had forgotten about them? These thoughts had kept him haunted, but fortunately Cinder release and mayor request for meeting had kept him distracted.

Besides, with the destruction of the CCT, he was unable to reach them by scroll.

He wondered what the mayor wanted from them. He had made a report to the militia's captain about the incident in the forest after he returned to the town. Maybe she wanted to hear it from Cinder's view, hopefully.

It was noon when the two of them could left the hospital. They didn't say a word to one another from her room to the hospital's entrance.

During her stay she wore the usual hospital gown, but now she sported a pair of blue jeans and a white shirt which covered most of her neck, they were given to her by the nurse from the lost and found items since her clothes were cut off from her by the doctors. She looked a little unease in them, maybe the colours were too far cry from her usual black and red theme or just the style bothered her. Her black hair reached down to her shoulders and were styled in a way which covered her scar on her face. For Jaune, she looked almost normal, like any

other person he could see in the town or how she had looked like in Beacon but with a bit shorter hair. He shook his head. “Are you ready?”

She regarded him for a moment with a neutral face and gave him a nod.

The town hall, where the mayor’s office was located, was a few streets away from the hospital – according to a nurse. The walk to there was as quiet as the last few days. They kept respectful distance between them and tried to pretend that they weren’t keeping an eye on the other.

After a five-minute walk, they reached Antlers’ main square. It was nothing special, downright generic for Jaune taste. It was a quintessential example of small-town simplicity. The square itself was a modest open area paved with worn cobblestones, residential buildings and a handful of cafes dominated much of the square which obviously had lived better days with their worn signs. In the centre stood a modest statue of a bearded man made from marble – most likely Antlers’ founder. Around the statue, a few weathered wooden benches provided seating for the town’s residents which now were empty.

Dominating one side of the square was the town hall, an unremarkable two-story building. Its architecture was plain and functional, with tall-framed windows and a single door marked the building’s name in peeling gold letters. A simple flagpole stood in front of the building, flying the flag of Antlers below Vale’s twin axes. A subtle reminder for the people where their loyalty should lie.

Sparse trees dotted the perimeter of the square, their leaves providing dappled shade in the summer months for those who choose rest below them on the grass.

The overall atmosphere was unassuming and unremarkable. This square could have been the definition of a place where life was predictable, and every day was the same as the previous one, a place where time stood still. It was the same feeling he had in Ansel, a feeling that if he had stayed, he would have gotten stuck there forever.

“Are you coming or not?” asked Cinder irritated.

The question stirred Jaune out of his stupor. The Fall Maiden looked at him with annoyance a few meters from him.

“Yeah, I’m coming.”

“Fantastic.” said Cinder with a flat tone.

Finding the mayor’s office was not a difficult task, within minutes they found themselves in front the mayor’s door on the upper floor which was slightly open. Jaune was about to knock on the door when Cinder grabbed his hand stopping him from knocking. A woman's voice was heard from the room.

“... yes, I’m sure. No, it won’t be necessary. I don’t want to involve the OSC, it will be easier if we deal with it personally.”

“William, you too were speaking with them when they arrived, don’t tell me that you trust them. You know it well the safety of this town is only secondary for them. No matter what that Powell guy said, I know his kind, he would rather use this as an opportunity for himself rather than help us. We keep this in the house and forget that this ever happened.”

What did she want to keep in the house?

“Rumours or not I do not want to see them here ever again. Yes, this is whole thing is weird but I’m going to solve it out. You always say that sometimes you have to roll the hard six, whatever it means. It’ll be fine, don’t worry. I need to go, Jenny said that they’re on their way. See you soon.” finished the call the mayor.

Neither of them moved as they tried to make sense of what they had heard. What Jaune managed to put together that the mayor had a strong dislike towards this OSC. He looked at Cinder who was still in her thoughts. He couldn’t ask her because the open door, instead he waited until she let go of his hand then she knocked on the door a few moments later.

“Come in.”

Jaune followed Cinder in. The office was about the same size as his old dorm in Beacon, on the two opposite sides of the room were bookshelves full of thick tomes, in the centre of the room a little coffee table with a pair of sofas facing each other. Beyond that were a big table in front of a window with two empty chairs where the Mayor of Antlers sat.

A woman in her late fifties greeted them, her auburn hair had started to turn grey at its roots, around her eyes crow’s feet. She offered them a welcoming smile, a smile which didn’t reach her eyes. Her eyes held a calculating gaze which were busy to move from Jaune to Cinder and back to him, and if he noticed this, then he was sure Cinder did it too. Was she assessing them?

“Welcome Mr. Arc and Ms. Ella.” she greeted them kindly. “Please take a seat.” After they took a seat at the table she continued, “My name is Lauren Roslyn, Mayor of Antlers, thank you for coming.”

“Thank you for the invitation.” His mother had always said that being polite is a half victory. The previous phone call was discouraging at best for them. Being on her good side could be beneficial for them.

“Why did you want to speak with us?” But appeared Cinder viewed this differently. Her voice was full mistrust, and her eye was narrowed on the woman on the other side who for some reason didn’t take Cinder’s harsh tone as an insult.

“I wished to speak with the two of you about what happened on that mission.”

“I already made a report about that a few days ago.” responded Jaune. “There is nothing else that I could add.”

“Yes, you did, Mr Arc, but I have a few questions. Just to see things clear. I don’t think it would be too problematic.” Her voice indicated that it was not really a request. She looked

down to what looked like his report where he saw a few highlighted lines and sticky notes next to them. "I wish to start at the beginning. Mr. Arc, you said that Miss Ella is your partner."

He moved his eyes briefly to Cinder then back to Roslyn. "Yes."

"Then why our records shows that your partner's name is Pyrrha Nikos?"

The mention of her name gave him a pause. Roslyn did some research on him which could lead this questioning into a potential catastrophic situation, given who was sitting next to him. "Because our... partnership is recent. We didn't have the opportunity to change it in the registry."

"I see." She looked up from her notes and linked her hands on the table. "I spoke with the guards who were on duty at the gates when you two arrived. They claimed that you Miss Ella arrived with the refugees, hours earlier than Mr. Arc that day." She questioned Cinder this time. Jaune was curious what she will say.

"Yes. We split up when we saw them in the woods, Ar- Jaune helped out at the rear, holding up some Grimms, giving me some time to help those who were slower than the main group." she lied. It was a believable story, but it would fail if the mayor or someone ask around in the camp.

"Hmm. That's odd, as far as I'm aware there're only two Hunters with the refugee group." she looked down to her notes then back, "A married couple from one of the attacked villages. I believe you've met them, Mr. Arc. They have a daughter who they had lost in the flight and who was later found by you a few hours later after your arrival."

Cinder gave him a side eye, she was visibly tense, just like Jaune himself. Their story was falling into dust by the seconds.

"But this isn't the only strange thing for me. On the next day Mr. Arc goes to the Huntsmen Office to take on a job which is interesting because his partner already took the only one which was under her name alone according to the contract and left on the previous day. Also, you didn't correct me, Miss Ella, when I said that you came with the refugees because the contract was claimed a day before their arrival." she pointed out calmly.

At this point he knew they were toasted. His eyes wandered to Cinder to see how she was taking all this, she was looking rigidly at Mayor Roslyn, her fingers turning white as she gripped the arm of the wooden chair.

"The story doesn't quite add up when you put it all together, does it? Personally, I don't know much about being Huntsman, but they do sometimes show up in this town, and they don't seem to leave without their partner to take on a job that takes them to the other side of the kingdom."

She was right. No one would do that, especially not with an escort job where the numbers really mattered.

“So, when your story didn’t make sense to me, I decided to do some digging. Since I didn’t find anything about Cinder Ella – like she doesn’t even exist – I chose to go after Jaune Arc. Lucky for me, he had more to his name than a few dates. This mainly thanks to your previous partner, Mr. Arc. She was a famous tournament fighter and because of this some sites and gossip magazines reported about everything that happened with her, including her untimely demise. Imagine my surprise when I saw a picture about the person who allegedly responsible for her death.” she said her last sentence to Cinder who was still in her previous position.

“What do you want?” asked Cinder after a few moments in a harsh voice.

Roslyn stood up from her chair and turned her back on them to look out the window behind her which faced the town’s main square. A few seconds later she spoke in a hard tone, “I want you to leave. Both of you.” She turned around. Her face lost its kindness that welcomed them a couple of minutes ago. “Wherever either of you show up that place suffers major loses.”

“That’s not entirely –“ tried Jaune.

“Vale, Haven Academy, Argus, Atlas and Mantle.” listed Roslyn. “The luckier ones only suffered heavy property damage but Vale and especially Atlas and Mantle were not so fortunate. Tens of thousands of dead, two of the greatest cities of the planet are nothing more than a pile of rubble. Argus attacked by a Leviathan-class Grimm.”

“I have nothing –“

“I’m not finished, Miss Fall.” If Roslyn knew who Cinder was then shutting her up like this was brave from her, or foolish, “Haven Academy lost its entire staff - rendering the school inactive and making Shade the only functioning academy in whole of Remnant when we need more Huntsman than ever. And Vale, where all this began. If it true what I read about that, then you two have personal history, the kind where you should be ripping each other’s throat out, not posing as partners.”

“Your point is?” snapped Cinder. Jaune feared that she would attack Roslyn.

“Why don’t you? Why all this charade?”

Neither of them gave her immediately answer. She was right, they should be at each other’s throat, not playing this farce. Even after she had left Salem, she was still responsible for all her crimes, known or unknown. He was a Huntsman; he was supposed to protect the people from her not helping her. This would be true in a simple world, but this was not one. She was more than your everyday villain, and now she tried to not be one which begged for a question.

Did she deserve the chance?

They gave it to Emerald, and it seemed that it worked out, but Cinder was not Emerald. Cinder was... well, her. Denying it from her meant that he had to fight with her which was

suicidal at best. This was acceptable for Jaune, but he was unwilling put other in dangers doing so. Besides the whole Maiden business put this debate into another level.

For the moment, he knew where the Fall Maiden was. Fighting with her guaranteed that he would lose her for a long time, whether he won or not. He didn't think Cinder was eager to go back to Salem or that she would welcome her back, but the next host was an unknown which was risky.

What mattered the most was that the enemy didn't know her where about, and the best way to ensuring this was to keep her close and keeping her out of enemy hands.

"Things've changed" answered Jaune finally.

"Changed? How?" probed Roslyn.

"That's none of your concern!" hissed Cinder. She barely gave an answer to him, she was never going to give one to Roslyn.

"It is when my home is at stake!"

Cinder was about to retort when Jaune intervened, "It's not, I promise." He tried to defuse the situation. "Antlers is safe."

"Then what happened those villages? Hmm? And why I get reports about fairy tale creatures from the survivors?"

"What creatures are you talking about" asked Jaune.

Roslyn let out a sigh, "White shadows. Some survivors claim that they saw white shadows in the distant on the nights of the attacks. None of them had a good look at them given the situation but they are certain that something else were there on those nights besides the Grimm." With one hand, she massaged her temple.

"Malaluxes" whispered Jaune. The name of the creatures which that man was talking about in the inn at Ember Mountain. Could it have been more than the ramblings of a madman?

"Yes, some of them called them that. As far as I know these creatures are from folklore tales in the south, on the Grasslands."

"I've heard about them not long ago. They're others too who saw them, they said the same things as you."

"And it wouldn't be the first tale which came true." The mayor glanced at Cinder for a moment. Yeah, now whole Remnant knew about the Seasonal Maidens.

"But it doesn't matter. I still want you both to leave. I have enough problems already; I don't want to deal with the OSC again because of you."

"The OSC? What's that?" asked Cinder.

“They are one of the results of your little stunt at the Vytal Festival. They have become more active in past month thanks to these attacks, at least we see them more in the outer settlements. The big city is finally showing a little care towards us but dealing with spooks still a nightmare. Anyway, I ask you to leave by tomorrow.”

“And if I don’t?” asked Cinder.

“Then you don’t. But sooner or later OSC *will* show up and they’re not so lenient as me. Make no mistake, Miss Fall, the reason why I don’t have the militia to arrest you because you are the Fall Maiden. I’ve looked up every story that remotely mentioning the Seasonal Maidens and if even half of it is true those stories, then we can do very little to stop you. You can control the elements and since half of the town is made of wood, you can burn Antlers down to the ground. I don’t want this to happen. This why asking you to leave before OSC shows up.” explained Roslyn. “You can even continue your job that you have taken.”

“What do you mean? The grimms almost killed everyone.” said Cinder.

“Yes, almost. But Miss Keres is still alive, and she has to go to Vale, so your contract is still active despite your... setback in the woods.”

“What about her relatives, I mean won’t they raise an issue about this, after what happened?” asked Jaune.

“They certainly would, if she had any.”

Cinder looked at the mayor strangely. The anger was now replaced by something he couldn't define.

“You mean she’s an...?” began Jaune.

“She’s an orphan. She’s from the same village where those married Huntsmen lived. There was an orphanage there. According to reports, she was the only child to survive the attack.” she sighed, “Poor girl.”

“So, you would entrust me with an orphan girl despite what you know about me?” asked Cinder in her disbelief.

“Goodness no.” said the mayor, “But since Mr. Arc acts civilly with you, I guess he intends to travel alongside with you, and after what I read about him, I trust him that he will finish the job if you bail on them. That’s why I added him to the contract and put him in charge of its fundings.” she reviled. This meant that the liens that every hunter gets on this kind of job to buy supplies and equipment were added to his account, so Cinder wouldn't get a lien if she abandoned them. Cinder face was unreadably blank for him as she focused on Roslyn, but he could imagine she was happy.

“But if she an orphan, why does she have to go to Vale?” asked Jaune. Antlers was one of the farthest towns from the capital. If there was no orphanage here, then surely there was a closer one somewhere in the region.

“Because this is the law.” Jaune was confused. What kind of law said this?

“Explain.” demanded Cinder.

“Every orphan above five must be send to Vale if it possible.” said Roslyn.

“Why?” asked Cinder with suspicion.

“The official reason is that the increased Grimm activity makes the countryside more dangerous and only Vale is safe enough.” Roslyn rolled her eyes. “That since these children doesn’t have any parent to protect them, it is the state’s duty to be their parent.”

“And the unofficial reason?” questioned Jaune.

“Vale population was hit noticeably by the attack, tens of thousands died. That kind of numbers makes themselves aware in the economy. They have to fill those empty spots up before the kingdom weakens and the towns and villages like us far away start to ask why they aren’t helping us and start to break away from their control. Since forcing people to move in the city from villages is too difficult, they chose to bring in those who has no one. Parentless children. They can teach them, train them for any role the city needs them to be when they reach adulthood.” Roslyn sighed, “Not a bad life considering everything, surely a better one than they could have out here, but for many this leaves a bitter taste in the mouth.”

Roslyn’s answer agitated Cinder more because a small trail of smoke started to raise where she gripped the chair’s wooden arm.

“How did the Council manage to pass this? The people would be in uproar, economy or not.” In Atlas Jaune paid more attention to the politics than back home because how closely he had worked for Ironwood and how much time he had spent in Mantle. He had seen how one decision can affect the people and how they had reacted to it.

The woman next to him clenched her jaw, her breathing was visible as her shoulders moved up and down, and her amber eye looked like lava from where he sat.

“It was an executive order from the President.” Roslyn revealed.

“President? We don’t have a president.” stated Jaune. Since the Last King the council was who made the laws, Vale never had a president.

“I mentioned before that one of the results of Miss Fall’s action in Vale was the creation of the Office of Strategic Coordination, the other was a more centralised government structure.” said Roslyn, “During the attack, the council was unable to lead an effective response to defend the city. None of them stood up and coordinate the police, the defence forces, or the Atlasian army. The latter was particularly embarrassing because they had to take the lead to manage the defence, for the people this looked as the total failure of the council as a governing body. The resentment was so strong that the council members were forced to step down after an assassination attempt. The new council has decided to restructure the government body. The most crucial changes were establishing a clear hierarchy and defining

responsibilities, as these were seen by the people as the main reasons why the attack was so severe.”

Roslyn was interrupted by her phone on the table which started ringing. She picked it up immediately then put it back and checked the time on her wrist. “I’m sorry but looks like we’re going to have to stop our conversation here.” she looked into their eyes, “As I said, leave as soon as possible. Now go, please.”

Cinder briefly regarded him before they stood up and walked to the office’s door.

“Mr. Arc, Miss Fall.” Roslyn called out and they turned back. “Before your departure, visit the Huntsman Office for the paperwork. Goodbye.”

The main square was as silent and empty when they had entered the town hall, but he didn’t feel the same boredom as before. Roslyn gave them a time limit. Tomorrow morning. This was not direct threat, but a highly strong suggestion. A suggestion that he was going to follow before things took bad turns. The longer they were staying the certainty of trouble was growing. One way or another someone was going to recognise the infamous Fall Maiden, there was no way one of these people hadn’t seen a picture of her.

As Jaune stood there and mused, the said Maiden stepped next his left side. The knight noticed how her hand clenched in a fist, her lips in a tight thin line, the amber eye which was focused on the square’s statue held such an intense glare that could ablaze the marble statue. Distracting her might help on the statue.

“We should go. If we hurry, we can take care of the paperwork and get the supplies before sundown.”

But before he could start walking, she replied, “That’s all you have to say?”

“About what?” He turned to her.

“About all of this!” she exclaimed, “Aren’t you supposed to be a goody-two-shoes Huntsman? Don’t tell me you’re okay with this!”

“The law? I admit it’s a little strange but ultimately not a bad thing. They get a stable life.”

“Ugh, you don’t see it, do you?” she said frustrated.

“See what?”

“Do you truly believe that they get a choice? That they will be able to walk away whenever they wish? No! Vale wouldn’t let them leave, not after they’ve invested in them, because that’s how they’ll see them. An investment. They’ll force them to stay there and do what the rich and powerful want. They will be nothing more than slaves!” she said hotly.

“You see more into it than what’s in it. No one will force them to do anything.” Jaune said dismissively, “Even if someone would try, the people wouldn’t stand for it.”

Cinder stepped closer to him, a murderous glare in her eye. “You don’t know anything, Arc. They don’t care about anyone until something goes wrong which affects them. They won’t take a second look at an orphan girl who needs their help.” she growled.

“Since when do you care about others, let alone an orphan girl?” he retorted. He didn’t know what she wanted from this argument. This law’s existence was her fault to begin with, she could only blame herself. If she was looking for some kind of validation from him, then she would have to wait an eternity for it.

She stepped back a few steps from him, maintaining the eye contact. “None of your business.” She turned away. “Let’s get going.”

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In the Huntsman Office the same woman greeted them when Jaune was here a few days ago.

“Oh, Miss Ella and Mr. Arc, Mayor Roslyn told me to expect you and there are some changes in the mission’s contract.” she said with a kind smile. “Everything is pretty much finished; the only missing thing is Mr. Arc’s licence number to finalize it.” She pulled out a grey, flat rectangle device which was barely bigger than his palm and put it on the counter that separated them from her. “Touch your scroll to it and we are done.”

Jaune pulled out his scroll from his pocket, a flash of fear appeared in his mind that when he turned it on, he would be flooded with messages and unanswered calls, but he told himself that since the CCT had been down for years, he wouldn't get any notification.

“Are you alright, sir?” asked the women behind the counter with concern.

“Uh yes, yes, I’m good, just zoned out a little bit.” replied Jaune quickly. From the corner of his eye, he saw that Cinder briefly moved her head towards him on his left side. He chose to pretend that he didn’t notice it.

He turned on his scroll and typed in his password to boot it up. Jaune opened his licence then tapped the scroll to the terminal. The terminal made short, high-pitched sound, indicating that it had received the signal.

“And done. Your contract is updated, and the money is transferred to your account.”

“Thank –“

*Ping*

Huh?

*Ping-Ping*

*Ping, Ping, Ping.*

What the?

He looked down at his scroll which was furiously beeping and vibrated in his hand. The screen was lit up. His chest tightened at what he saw.

*53 missed calls*

*128 unread messages*

Oh no.

How was this possible!?! There was no CCT connection, only the local network worked.

"That's a hell of a lot of messages you've got there. I wonder who sent them." He didn't need to look to see her malicious grin; he could practically hear it in her sickly-sweet voice. But when Jaune looked up at her, the image in his head and the reality were an almost perfect match. Her amber eye held a cruel mirth that told Jaune Cinder knew exactly how panicked he was. "Are you going to answer them? It would be rude not to." She was pushing his buttons masterfully, and sadly, it was working. He needed a distraction before he did something stupid.

"H-how can I have CCT signal? The network is destroyed?"

"It's not CCT. It's Vale own network, called Relay Bridge Network. It was brought online over a year ago. First around the capital and the closer towns. We only have connection for seven months, I think." she said with a shrug, "Most of the time spotty though, they say the weather often interference the data stream or something." she explained.

"But if it's Vale only, then how can I receive messages from Vacuo?"

She only shrugged.

"This has been very informative and all, but we have to go to prepare for the trip. Bye." said Cinder then left the office. Where was she going?

"Uh yeah, thanks for the speed up. Goodbye!" said Jaune and quickly went after Cinder.

He caught up to her outside of the office as walked towards the direction of the eastern gate.

"Where are you going?" demanded Jaune.

"To the camp, obviously, to talk to Thana. I highly doubt Roslyn sent someone to inform her about all of this." she said without stopping. Jaune grabbed her shoulder to stop her.

"Don't touch me!" she hissed and shoved his hand away. Jaune could see that her iris turned a bit brighter and felt how the heat was radiating from her. She had been in a bad mood since their conversation with Roslyn, but he needed answers.

"Why do you care about her so much?"

“Because you obviously don’t. Otherwise, you wouldn’t act like a good little Huntsman and deliver her to Vale.”

He sighed. “Is this still about that? Look, she will be safer there than here, especially now with all these Grimm attack. And why did you take this job if you are so against this?” he asked.

“I didn’t know about this. Her caretaker didn’t mention anything. I thought she was her mother who thought it would be safer in Vale than out here. I didn’t ask around the group why they were going to Vale and risking that someone to recognise me.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anyway. You said that you wanted the reward money to start again. You won’t get a penny without coming to Vale with us.”

“I know!” she exclaimed, “But it doesn’t change on the fact that they won’t give her a choice.”

“And what choice did my partner get from you?” he said hotly, “Or the people in Atlas and Mantle?” He let out a humourless chuckle. “Your hypocrisy is truly outstanding. Preaching about free choice after everything you have done.”

He stepped into her personal space. He liked to imagine himself a patient person – especially after how long he had waited in the Ever After, but a few hours with her managed to push him over the edge.

“You are ten times worse than those who you’re talking about. They at least give something in exchange. But you?” He jabbed a finger into her shoulder. “You just try to take everything you want and leave nothing behind but death and destruction once it’s clear you’ve failed.”

His words seemed to successfully try her patience as well, because her eye was on fire – literally, but only for a few moments. It was a stroke of luck that no one saw them.

“Be careful, Arc. Be careful.” she warned him in a low tone.

“Or what?” he challenged her.

There was no reply from her, just her usual murderous glare. He wore a similar expression too.

“That’s what I thought too. Don’t act high and mighty, not with me. Go and speak with Thana until I buy what we need, I’m going to meet you there. We’re going to leave at seven in the morning.” Then he left without another word.

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The air was chilly and crisp, the orange rays of the sunlight filtered through among the tree leaves. The brilliant blue sky was cloudless which meant that Remnant’s shattered moon had

a sovereign rule over the skies.

The citizens of Antlers were just beginning to wake up and start their morning routines. Some were going to work, some were going home, some were just doing their errands early. Jaune thought him and his two companions belonged into the last one.

The group of three were at the settlement's eastern gate where the guards were preparing to open the gate for them. The previous day was a long one and he was sure this one was going to be an exhausting one too. He wished he could have slept for more than a few hours, but the nightmares wouldn't let him, which was responsible for the dark circles under his eyes.

His two companions didn't have this problem which only made him look like even more tired. Despite what had happened less than a week before, Thana didn't seem frightened, perhaps a little uncertain which was totally understandable.

His other companion who was now his unofficial... partner for this journey looked as ready as him. They had calmed down since yesterday, but Jaune expected more arguments which held the chance to turn violent since neither of them have to worry to blow their cover story.

Thana wore a grey hoodie over a yellow t-shirt, paired with faded blue jeans and black sneakers with pink laces. Her dark hair was tied in a ponytail, and a small navy backpack hung from her shoulder. Cinder looked mostly the same as yesterday, but she had changed her white shirt to a red one and was now wearing a black choker around her neck.

After they had passed, the gate closed behind them with a heavy thud. The path was well-trodden, stretching far into the distance before disappearing into the dense forest. Jaune took a deep breath, trying to shake off the remnants of fatigue, and glanced at his companions. It was truly strange how things could change in such a short time, and in such unexpected ways. He wanted to believe that things would go smoothly, but he kept his expectations low. Cinder and he were neither friends nor allies, but at the moment, their interests aligned, which might be enough for a time.

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

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

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure that fishes don’t have fingers.”

“Then why are they called fish fingers?”

“I don’t know, but not because they are made from fish’s fingers.”

“Hmm, what about hot dogs?”

Jaune sighed. It was in the afternoon when Thana’s timid persona had disappeared and started bombing him with questions.

“Thana,” Jaune began, trying to keep his tone patient as he sidestepped a low-hanging branch, “you know that hot dogs aren’t made from dogs, right?”

Thana giggled. “I know that! But who comes up with these names? It’s like they want to confuse us.”

“I think their inventors just wanted more creative names than just describe them what they are.”

“That’s silly.”

Jaune couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah, it is a bit silly when you think about it.”

Their journey so far was uneventful fortunately, they had an hour break to eat at noon but besides that, they had stopped a handful of times for a few minutes. The forest had got thicker, meaning they were truly out in the wild.

The weather so far was kind to them, but they were on the road less than ten hours, which was not much compared to how long the journey would take. He tried to pay attention to the sky to watch out for signs that would indicate a storm but thanks to the dense canopy, he could only see what was directly above them. During late spring this wasn’t so fortunate when storms could arrive in minutes.

The road that they followed had changed too. It was less wide and less obvious than hours earlier, the grass and wilder bushes had almost claimed it in a few places which made it obvious that this road was rarely used. This was both a blessing and a curse.

A blessing because they didn't have to worry about bandits because they would choose a road with more traffic.

A curse because if something happened to them, they had no hope for help to arrive in time, they were on their own completely. Luckily, only a handful of a thing would be dangerous to their group: a large number of grimm or bandits, running out of food or a serious accident. The latter was easily avoidable with some common sense and Aura. Running out of food was not a serious concern if they rationed what they had brought with them properly, it should be enough for their next stop. But to prepare for the worst, Jaune had bought a book that listed every edible plant and animal that one could find in Vale - where to find them, when, and how not to mix them up with something similar, all in one book.

The former two meant more dangers for them. Given the desolated road, the grimm had a bigger probability of showing up. Jaune was confident that he could deal with most of them alone, his fight with the Manticore was proof of this, the more exotic grimm which were rare and dangerous mostly lived in the mountains in the centre of the continent which he planned to avoid completely.

The only threat their number meant. Fighting a horde was extremely dangerous, a horde could contain anything from common Beowolves to ancient Goliaths. As much he had heard from Qrow, every sensible Huntsman avoided them like a plague because they were like ordering more shots after twenty – you never knew which one would end your night. Of course, the kingdoms didn't allow them to exist for long, usually, two or three airships solved this problem with their cannons.

But with his new... associate, dealing with that many Grimm would be easier. Cinder had some serious firepower – quite literally. Jaune had the misfortune to see what the Fall Maiden was capable of, and he sincerely hoped he wouldn't see it again in the near future.

The raven-haired woman was on the other side of Thana, giving the little girl protection on both sides. She didn't say a word to him since their departure from Antlers, no remarks, no insults, nothing. Jaune wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not. It could have meant that she was busy thinking about something. He highly doubted she was thinking about why fish fingers were named fish fingers. He had been keeping an eye on her since yesterday, their little disagreement hadn't ended in her favour, and she didn't seem like a person who would let this slide.

“ – can do?”

Jaune blinked a few times as he emerged from his thoughts. “Sorry, what did you say?” Jaune asked Thana.

“What your sword can do?” she asked eyeing Crocea Mors in his hip. “Everyone says that huntsman weapons can change into guns and a bunch of other things.”

“Uh, mine is not like that, it can only cut and sometimes stab.”

“Why?” she asked with a puzzled look.

“Because it’s very old, over a hundred years old. My great-great-grandfather used it to fight in the Great War, and back then transforming weapons didn’t exist yet.”

“So, it can’t change?” the disappointment was clear in her voice.

“Well, the sheath can turn into a shield.”

“Really! Can I see it?”

“Maybe later.”

She looked at him slightly disappointed. “Okay.”

The trees began to thin out as they went and Jaune could hear the trickling of water not so far from them. Moments later he saw it, a clear watered stream flowed amidst rocks in its bed. As far as he could see, the road followed the stream and a few hundred meters ahead there was a bright spot where the trees let the sunlight through among themselves which could be a good place to rest.

“Hey Jaune.” called Thana.

“Yes?”

“What about butterflies?”

He groaned which felt like came from his soul.

“Why not you ask Cinder about this? She could know more about this than me and bet she has a cooler weapon than me.” Jaune purposefully was looking away, avoiding the Maiden’s gaze but he could feel her death glare that she was sending in his way. Throwing Cinder under the bus felt nice.

“Don’t get me involved in this. The last time was excruciating enough.” said Cinder.

“Really?” He turned to the little girl who was nodding, “What did you find out?” He doubted that Cinder had revealed something important to a kid, but this was a good opportunity to fish for some information about her. Jaune took a brief glance at Cinder who was looking at him with narrowed eye.

“She likes vanilla ice cream. Oh, and her favourite colour is red.” said Thana with excitement. Who had thought that Cinder Fall’s favourite colour was red, what a shock.

“Really? Anything else?”

“She began to learn how to fight at fourteen to become a Huntress.”

“Aha.” said Jaune as he thought about it. This was interesting. Most hunters start their training at young age, around nine, in combat schools. So, this implied that Cinder didn’t attend any of them, rather she started to learn later. But how? Someone had trained her?

For a moment it felt to Jaune that he was thinking about himself, he quickly pushed away this thought. He was *nothing* like her! And he doubted that she ever wanted to be a Huntress.

“That sounds interesting. She had to be a talented student to get through initiation in the academies with a few years of training.” Maybe Cinder mentioned something to Thana that explained it.

Jaune stole a quick glance at the woman who looked less than pleased with his query about her. She didn’t look in his direction, but he had a view of her scowling face.

“I don’t know. She promised that she would tell me more about Huntress stuff, Mira’s parents used to tell us a lot of cool things.” she told him, smiling. She seemed interested in hunters, like most children. Jaune was surprised that she knew Mira and her parents.

They were from the last village that was attacked, and so was Thana. This could have meant that she might have seen something on that night.

“Thana,” started Jaune gently, “do you remember when the Grimm attacked your village?” His sudden change of topic didn’t go overly well.

Her smile disappeared and her movement became rigid. She stared at the ground as they walked, then answered, “Yes.” she said quietly, still looking down.

“What happened that night?”

“W-We went to sleep at nine as always. After everyone fell asleep, me and J-Jenny sneaked out from the bedroom.” said Thana as they slowed down, “We wanted to steal some cookies from the kitchen. Matt told Jenny how he did it last time and Jenny wanted to try it, she asked me to be her lookout because she was afraid that Mrs. Norris would notice her. She said that she would get me some too. She was still in the kitchen when it started.”

“How?” Jaune asked.

“I... I heard gunshots from outside, then the bells started to ring. Mrs. Norris always told us when the bells start to ring, we must run to the bunker, no matter what. Jenny came out of the kitchen, and we started to run to the bunker. T-The p-people were screaming, there was fire everywhere. We ran, b-but t-they were already t-there.”

“Who?”

“The Grimm, they were already there. Everyone started to run into the forest, we did too. I... We lost each other, it was too dark. And there was that horn sound.” she looked ahead but her eyes were unfocused.

“What horn?”

“Arc.”

Tears began to form. “I-I haven’t seen her in the camp.” her breath hitched.

“Thana, what horn did you hear?” Jaune pressed.

“Arc!”

“She asked me to be her lookout, and I lost her. S-She was my b-best friend” she whimpered.

“Thana, did you see who –“

“ARC!” yelled Cinder as she moved between him and Thana, blocking his line of vision to the girl. The Maiden glared furiously at him, making Jaune take a step back. He blinked a few times before realising what he had just done.

He looked over Cinder’s shoulder. Tears steadily flew from Thana’s eye as she stood there and cried.

He did this.

“Thana, I... I’m so – “ he tried to apologize but Cinder once again blocked his vision.

“It’s getting late.” she stated, “We should start to make the camp for the night. Go and gather firewood.” she ordered. Looking into her amber iris felt like looking into glowing lava. This was an ultimatum that promised violence if he refused. Jaune knew that he was on thin ice, she uncharacteristically cared about the girl.

“I just –“

“Now!” she hissed.

He remained silent then gave her a nod, he put down his backpack at the nearest tree and walked away, ashamed.

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Cinder watched Arc's back until he was far enough away, making sure he wasn't going to change his mind and come back. He should consider himself incredibly lucky. She would have burned him until nothing remained but ash if it weren't for the current situation. She closed her eye, opened her fist and took a calming breath. She needed to calm down, or at least look calm.

She turned around to face Thana who was still weeping. Cinder cursed that moron for doing this and putting her in this situation – mainly because she had no experience comforting anyone, let alone a child

She went over to the girl and knelt down slowly in front of her, her movements deliberate as she forced herself to approach the situation with care she wasn't used to. She watched Thana's small frame trembling with sobs. Cinder cursed under her breath again. What in the world was she supposed to say?

For a moment, she just stared, trying to come up with anything that would make the crying stop. The girl before her reminded her how much she hated these kinds of moments. Vulnerability. Weakness.

Cinder extended her hand but hesitated halfway for a moment before she finally made contact with her shoulder. The touch was awkward and stiff. She wasn't sure if touching Thana was the right move.

"Thana," Cinder said, her voice low, gentle, "it's okay. Please stop crying."

Thana didn't respond at first, still trapped in her sorrow. Her face was red, tears mixing with sweat from their long journey. Cinder's discomfort deepened. She shouldn't care, like no one had cared about her. But for some reason, she couldn't leave her like this.

"I..." Cinder tried again, grasping for words. "What happened wasn't your fault. You know that, right?"

Thana sniffled but didn't look up. "But it was. I should've been faster. I should've stayed with Jenny. She was my best friend, and I lost her."

Cinder bit her lower lip. This wasn't her strong suit. Empathy was a skill she had no use for in her life, and yet here she was. "You didn't lose her. You got separated. There's a difference, it was out of your control." Her words slightly lost their gentleness as she tried to convince the girl.

Thana shook her head, more tears falling. "I was supposed to protect her. But I ran away."

Cinder felt a flicker of irritation. She wasn't good at this, never was, because she never had to. Because usually, she was the one who caused pain to others.

Arc was the one who was supposed to be here and help Thana, not Cinder.

"You didn't run away." Cinder said, her voice softening against her will. "You did what you had to do to survive."

Thana sniffled again and finally lifted her gaze, meeting Cinder's eyes. Her face was wet with tears, her expression raw with guilt and fear. "I just... I just want Jenny back." she whispered.

Cinder's chest tightened. She wasn't used to this, someone telling her about their greatest wish in hope that she somehow could make them come true. She had been alone for so long; she had learned to rely only on herself. She couldn't even remember when was the last time she had offered comfort – if she ever even had.

"We all want things we can't have." Cinder said eventually. A little girl wished her friend to be alive, and once upon a time, another girl wished she had someone like Thana. But these wishes never came true, the world was too cruel for that. "But this doesn't mean that she is gone, not completely. Until you're here, there is someone to remember her. Would you have her be forgotten?"

Thana shook her head.

“Then you keep going. For her. Understand?”

Thana stared at her for a long moment, as if weighing Cinder’s words. Then, slowly, she nodded, still sniffing but calmer than before. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

“And if that blonde idiot will ask you again about this, then you will say no to him or you will come and find me, okay?”

“But he is a Huntsman. Mrs. Norris said that we have to help them when they ask.”

Cinder almost scoffed. Of course, that matron had said that. She was very familiar with how the people viewed Huntsmen and Huntresses in the countryside, and what tales they told the children about them. She had heard them when she lived in Mistral.

“I know what kind of stories you’ve heard about the Huntsmen and Huntresses but let me tell you a secret. Not everyone who looks like a hero is a hero.”

“But they help people.” Thana argued. The naivety spoke from her, but Cinder didn’t expect the girl to understand her, children only saw the world in black and white. Good and bad were two distinctly different notions for them which could never mix.

“Only for those who they think are worthy enough.” Her words just further confused Thana who looked back puzzled.

“Come.” said Cinder as she stood up. “I saw a few bushes with berries on the other side of the stream a little bit back. Let’s check it out if it is something eatable, it’ll be nice after dinner. I hope it’s blackberry.” The promise of sweetness did its trick. Thana wiped at her eyes with the back of her sleeve and gave Cinder a tiny smile, barely noticeable.

They put down their backpacks onto the grass and strode back on the road alongside the stream.

Cinder hadn’t meant to care this much. She wasn’t supposed to care at all. But somehow, in this small, insignificant girl, she saw herself fifteen years ago. Before things got worse, before the Madame.

She didn’t wish the same fate for Thana, that’s why she was so against this job. Cinder feared that Vale would hold the same thing for the orphan girl, this made her feel... anxious. She feared that she was like her monster of stepmother when she had taken her to Atlas. Even after all these years, she still hated her with all of her heart and thought that she died too quickly. She deserved a slower and more painful death.

The thought that she could become someone like the Madame for Thana made her angry. And what made her truly angry was that that buffoon was okay with completing this job, even after they had learned its true nature.

What Vale was doing was practically slavery with a few extra steps and sympathetic words which fooled the people. They’re planning to train the children to become something that the

city needs so the rich and powerful can continue their life like nothing had happened. The freedom of choice would be taken from them like from her, after all, orphans had no one who would step up for them, not even a Huntsman.

“It’s over there.” Thana pointed across the stream, bringing Cinder out of her thoughts.

The water didn’t appear deep or fast – the early summer storms were yet to come. The whole thing was around five meters wide at this part, pocked by different size rocks which emerged out of the gently flowing water. They looked good enough to use them to avoid the shallow water.

She tested a few rocks near the bank to see if they were stable enough. “Alright, they look adequate for use.”

“Adikit?”

“Adequate.” corrected her Cinder, “It means good enough. I’ll go first, follow my steps and be careful.”

Crossing the stream was trivial for Cinder and it was not a big challenge for Thana either. When they arrived at the other bank, they had the chance to inspect closer the berries.

“Is this blackberry?” asked Than while she examined one closer.

“Yes. Yes, it is” she replied before she tasted one. “Have you ever tried one?”

“No, only strawberry. Is it better?”

“Pick one and tell me.” said Cinder amused. She watched how Thana’s face transformed from a curious impression into a happy one as she tested the fruit, she picked immediately two more berries. “I take that you like it.”

“It’s the best thing ever!” said the girl with a full mouth.

“Hmm, almost. If you praise blackberries this high, then you have to expand your vocabulary when you taste a mulberry.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Cinder confirmed.

They ate a few more berries before Thana asked, “How are we going to take them back to the camp?”

That was a good question. Indeed how? They had left their bags in the clearing and carrying them in their pockets was a foolish idea. As she was trying to solve this problem, Cinder’s eye wandered to Thana.

“Come here.” Thana looked at her confused for a moment before she stepped before Cinder. “Turn around.” The solution for their transportation problem was right in front of her, on the

back of the girl.

“We are going to use the hood of your hoodie.” Cinder explained, “You’ll have to be a bit mindful while we walk back but it would be good enough for now”

Thana looked back at her with a smile. “Adequate?”

She returned the smile. “Yes, adequate.”

Cinder felt proud that she taught something.

“Now turn back and munch on the berries while I fill your hood.”

Filling her hood took longer than Cinder had anticipated, picking blackberries with one hand was very time-consuming. She was almost finished when the black-haired girl spoke. “How did you recognise them? Mrs Norris said that we mustn’t eat berries from the forest.”

“How old are you?”

“Nine.” answered puzzled.

“... When I was nine, I lived at a farm next to a village and the people often had bushes with different kinds of berries. I was a... picky eater,” Not a term that Cinder would have used but Thana didn’t need to know about her early childhood or any part of it. “but I always liked fruits- especially blackberry. But other berries were growing next to them, so I had to learn how to recognise them. It has thorny stems and five pale pink petals when its flowers, when you eat enough you can easily recognise the berries.”

Thana hummed.

“Well, we’re finished.” declared Cinder, “I don’t think we can put more in your hood.”

Thana tried to turn his head to see how much berry rested in her hood, but Cinder stopped her. “Don’t. You will spill them out.”

“I could take off my hoodie and you could bring them, it would be safer.” she offered sweetly, too sweetly.

“I’m a Huntress and my job is to protect you. How could I do that when my only hand is full of blackberry?” she gave the girl a knowing look, amused. “Or do you just want to eat them on the way back while I carry them?”

“No, of course not.” Thana said quickly.

Cinder raised her eyebrow. “Aha.” she replied in a tone that strongly implied that she didn’t believe the girl.

“You are a meanie.” she declared with a pout and crossed arms after she had realised that her plot hadn’t worked.

“I am.” agreed Cinder proudly with a smile. “Now let’s go back and be careful with my blackberries, don’t spill them out.”

“Your blackberries?”

“Yes, they’re my payment for protecting you from grimmings and bears. I will be behind you so I can munch on my berries.” She couldn’t hold herself back from grinning when she saw Thana’s incredulous expression. Thana muttered something under her nose, but all Cinder could hear was ‘evil Huntress’.

*Cute*

The walk back took a bit longer because of the berries which Cinder raided a few times, she hummed delightfully at every berry to tease Thana who by now totally forgot what happened an hour before.

Cinder thought that she successfully comforted Thana. It felt strange for her because she had never done it before, and it felt... good.

“Do you think Jaune is back with the firewood?” Thana’s question broke Cinder’s line of thought. She had expected that Arc would come up in conversation at one point as they got closer to their hastily selected camp.

“An hour should have been enough for him.” And he better come to his senses for his own sake. Even she had noticed that Thana was stressed from his questioning, but he hadn’t stopped, not even when she started to cry.

He was different. She didn’t want to admit but this bothered her. Not because she cared about him, but because this made him unpredictable. He had saved her for some reason. She had made some mocking comments about his dead partner in the hospital which should have made him furious.

But he hadn’t.

Instead, he had remained calm to the point that he told her to stop trying to make him angry. He had played along with her cover and made himself her partner. He had finished their argument by practically challenging her in the middle of a town. And now, this incident with Thana.

He kept doing things that were the opposite of his nature.

This frustrated her. She had lost control over this whole thing for days which she hated. Where was that moron who blindly charged at her at Haven with laughable skill set? Or at Atlas. Killing that tin can shouldn’t have changed him this much. She had to admit she had never thought that he would be capable of killing someone just to stop her, but he hadn’t even mentioned it so far.

No. Something else had to have happened.

She knew that he alongside Team RWBY had been listed as K.I.A. for a few months, but what could have happened that changed him this much?

She was absolutely sure that he wouldn't tell her if she would ask. No, he would stop her and tell her that she has no right to know. Why would she have? She probably had something to do with his top three worst moments in his life.

Naturally, he didn't trust her which was mutual. She had seen how he was looking in her direction every few minutes, the quick glances at her reactions. He was waiting when she would slip and give him a reason to end her, like he would be able to kill a Maiden that was not knocking on death's door. It was only a matter of time that he would try something stupid.

That was why she always ensured that he was on her right side, so she could too keep an eye on him.

"Do you think he will ask again about that night?" she asked quietly but Cinder could hear anxiety in her voice.

"No." she answered confidently, "Even if he tries again, I will stop him."

"Okay." her word was quiet but free of the previous anxiety.

Cinder reached into Thana's hood, grabbed three more berries, and stepped next to her. "Here." she offered the blackberries, "This will be all you get until dinner." Thana took them with a tiny smile.

A few more minutes later she could smell smoke, at first, she thought that there was a forest fire nearby but then she realised that they were almost back to their camp which meant that Arc was already back and had made himself useful.

Her deduction proved to be true when they arrived back and saw the burning campfire, and beside it Arc who looked ashamed when he saw Thana. This pleased Cinder because this meant that he wouldn't try again upsetting Thana who was avoiding his gaze and moving closer to Cinder.

While they're getting closer, Cinder noticed that Arc had kept his eyes on the girl with a flash of concern on his face, this confused her.

Then she realised, he was looking for injury. He had thought that she would hurt Thana, this set her little into a foul mood. After all, he was the one who had hurt her.

"You're back."

"Obviously." she replied dryly.

His eyes moved from Cinder to the girl next to her. "Thana, I'm sorry about what I did. You clearly didn't wish to speak about it, and I failed to notice it." he admitted it, "I promise it won't happen again. Can you forgive me?"

His words were sincere enough, she guessed. Although she expected more.

Thana didn't give an immediate answer which made him squirm a little. Cinder almost smiled at this.

*Good girl.*

A few moments later Thana spoke. "It's okay. I forgive you."

He looked relieved and gave a small smile to Thana.

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Dinner was a small, mostly quiet event, only the cracking fire and sometimes Thana interrupted the silence. Dinner itself was not much, instant noodles that Arc had bought yesterday. At least he got the ones with the beef flavour, which made the blackberries seem even better as a dessert.

The sun had disappeared hours ago, and the moon took its place, the air was cool, but the fire kept it away.

Cinder glanced at her two companions. Thana was already in her sleeping bag, sleeping. Arc, however, remained seated by the fire, staring into the flames with a somber expression, the dark circles under his eyes gave the impression that he hadn't slept in days. His eyes flicked toward her, catching her gaze. "What?"

"You look shit." she remarked bluntly. He broke their eye contact and sighed.

"I know." a curt answer.

"You should go to sleep; I take the first watch." she offered graciously in her opinion.

He glanced back at her; the distrust and suspicion were clear on his face. "I'm not tired enough to sleep."

Cinder raised an eyebrow, leaning back slightly as she studied him again but now closer. His posture was slouched, shoulders sagging, his hair a messy, tangled mass, and the bags under his eyes were more pronounced than in the morning. His eyes, though still sharp, held a dullness she was familiar with.

"Not tired enough, huh?" Cinder scoffed, "You look like you've been hit by a Bullhead."

"Feels that way sometimes." replied dryly, "But I'll be fine."

She resisted the urge to roll her eye. And here it was, his martyr complex. It was entertaining at first at Haven, but it was getting old fast. "But I'll be fine." she mimicked with mockery. "Don't expect me to carry you when you pass out of exhaustion. You have little use already."

Silence hung between them for a moment, the only sound was the crackling fire. He didn't respond immediately, he just stared into the flames. "And how useful are you? Because if I remember correctly less than a week ago you almost died and the only reason you're still alive is me."

Cinder was irritated by his words, her muscles tensed at his words, but she tried to not show it that his words affected her. "They got lucky; I was still asleep when they showed up. And don't pretend that was mercy that saved my life, you probably would have killed me if didn't possess the Maiden power."

Arc tore his eyes from the fire, glancing at her. "It might have helped. But someone else was also there to help me to decide."

This got her confused. Who was he referring to? Besides him, everyone was dead except...

Cinder turned to Thana's sleeping form who was curled up tightly in her bag. She felt a sense of gratitude and a bit of frustration that a nine-year-old girl saved her despite that she was the Fall Maiden.

"You just couldn't do it in front of a child." Her accusation met with silence. Turning back, her eye connected with his as he was watching her.

"Maybe." he admitted, "But I was also curious why the Grimm were attacking you. The last time we met you were on her side. What've changed?"

She had no desire to answer so she offered a deal.

"I'll tell you," She leaned closer, "if you read me up all of the texts that you got yesterday."

His jaw tightened; she could see the frustration building in his eyes.

"Or what are you doing here all alone while your friends remained in Vacuo where they might die shortly given Salem is focusing on Shade." This question had been on her mind for days, ever since she had seen him that night.

His face hardened at her words, anger flashing in his eyes, but he remained silent.

"If you don't want to answer it's fine by me." a faint smirk was playing at the corners of her lips, "But then don't expect one from me neither." In her opinion, it was a fair deal.

"Go to sleep Cinder. I will take the first watch." he said coldly. It appears that he had enough of her pushing his buttons.

She raised an eyebrow at his sudden dismissal. For a moment, she considered pressing him further, but then her eyes shifted to the sword by his side, its hilt catching the glow of the firelight. A brief thought flashed through her mind: *What if he tries?* It would be the easiest thing for him to strike while she was asleep, a quick slice through her throat, and it would be over.

He noticed her lingering look, his expression unreadable.

“I don’t think –“

“If I want you to be dead you would be already.” he interrupted her like he read her mind, “I could have left you there after I finished that manticore and tell Thana that you’re already dead. This would have been the easiest, or in the hospital while you were unconscious. I had plenty of chances, and yet you’re still here. I won’t try to kill you tonight.”

She stared at him for a moment, searching his face for any hint of deception.

“And tomorrow?”

“That remains to be seen.”

His response only deepened her frustration. This fool’s delusion was impressive. Even the old wizard fell to the Fall Maiden’s fire and now he thought that he would be capable of killing her. Or maybe it was the exhaustion that spoke from him, sleep deprivation could cause decreases in brain activity – that would have explained a *lot*. Either way, he was an idiot, but idiots could be dangerous when they get overconfident. She still remembered when he had almost stabbed her at Haven.

She finally let out a sharp breath. “Fine,” she huffed, “but don’t be surprised when I draw something on your face with a permanent marker if you fall asleep.”

“I won’t.” She swore she saw his lips almost twitch up.

Although she tried to appear unaffected by their conversation, she wasn’t.

Cinder hated this feeling of uncertainty, of not knowing who would strike first. It wasn’t like her. Usually, she was the one in control, the one pulling the strings. She swore that she would be the one who defined her destiny, no one else.

She clenched her jaw. The Maiden power should have made her unstoppable, yet here she was, wary of a man who was nothing special, barely an afterthought.

But now, he was a threat, a smoking volcano ready to erupt in any day. He was unknown which could cost Cinder her freedom. She couldn’t allow that.

“Get some rest.” Arc’s voice broke her thoughts. “I’ll wake you when it’s your turn to take watch.”

Cinder hesitated for a moment before standing up. She gave him one last glance, trying to read his expression, but his focus had returned to the fire as if she wasn’t even there.

She moved to her prepared sleeping bag which, like Thana’s, was comfortably close to the fire. She settled into her sleeping bag, but before she zipped it closed, Cinder placed her hand on the ground next to her and heated it up. Within seconds, the earth reached the necessary temperature, and she formed a simple glass dagger which she hid in her bag.

Just in case.

---

Where did she get a permanent marker?

Not like he was wary of her threat but curious. He was expecting something more serious from her after his own threat, but it wasn't the first time that she didn't take him seriously.

He turned his attention from the fire to her sleeping form.

It was unexpected from her that she didn't make a bigger fuss about who took the first watch, especially after how she looked at Crocea Mors. Thinking back maybe he had been harsher than it was recommended, but she got under his skin very fast.

Those messages were a touchy for him, mainly because he hadn't read them yet. He tried to not think about them, but now thanks to her they're on his mind. And the worst thing was that he was alone and had nothing else to do that could distract him.

He felt the scroll present in his pocket which felt heavier than it should be.

Jaune sighed then took it out and turned his attention to the black screen. He was thinking that now he had the time to read them, but he knew he did not have the courage for that. He already felt guilty enough to leave them, he didn't need more. And it would ruin his plan to exhaust himself enough that he wouldn't dream. He needed as much sleep as he could get, he dreaded to think how Cinder could use against him the fact that he couldn't sleep from the nightmares. She had already enough ammunition against him.

He slipped the scroll back into his pocket and buried his face in his hands. Today was a bad one thanks to him. He was so fixated on these Grimm attacks that he entirely ignored how traumatic it was for Thana to speak about it.

So much that Cinder had to stop him.

Huh, the end of the world was truly close.

The night was calm and warm enough near the fire, only the sound of the cracking fire and the nearby stream interrupted the stillness of the forest.

He spent his remaining hours attending the fire and keeping his eyes and ears on the forest. It was around two or three in the morning when he felt too tired and woke up Cinder who was already awake by the time he got near her. While she was getting out of her resting place, he was settling into his. He placed his sword in an arm reach next to himself and in the moment his head touched the pillow he fell asleep.

When he woke up in the morning, he was relieved that he had no nightmare.

Or at least that's what he thought.

Because when the world came into focus, he met with a familiar image. Cinder stood above him with a calculating look while she pressed an obsidian sword to his neck.

## Chapter End Notes

Welcome back, everyone!

Thank you for the comments on the prev chapter. They are always appreciated, good or not. Your thoughts are always fascinating to read, so feel free to share them if you have any.

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

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

Jaune's first instinct was to reach for Crocea Mors, but his hand hit nothing but dirt. The sword wasn't where he had left it last night. He quickly glanced around and saw it leaning against a tree, several meters away. But before he could move, Cinder pressed her blade harder against his neck, cutting off any thoughts of activating his Aura.

"Don't even think about it. Not even your Semblance can heal a half-severed head." she said, her voice smooth but edged with menace.

Jaune turned his attention back to her, his pulse quickening. He scanned the area with his eyes, as much as his prone position allowed.

"Where's Thana?" he asked, his worry rising at the girl's absence.

"I sent her to gather blackberries for the road." Cinder replied, a faint smirk curling at the corner of her lips. "I gave her a bag, so we've got plenty of time to talk alone."

"To talk? This feels more like a prelude to a monologue before you kill me." Jaune replied.

"Don't tempt me." she warned, eyes narrowing.

Cinder's grip on her weapon didn't loosen as she continued. "During the night, I had time to reflect on this... little arrangement of ours. You know, it has a certain novelty – two enemies teaming up for a common cause, like in those Mistrali pirate films. Pirates of the Karrisian, I think."

Jaune had only a small recollection about them, but he kept silent.

"But there's a common theme in those films. Do you know what it is?" Cinder asked, but he didn't respond. She leaned closer. "They always tried to betray each other in the end. So, I've been wondering. What's stopping you from doing the same to me? I know this truce is temporary, but what's going to stop you from turning me in the moment we cross Vale's gates?"

She shifted, placing her boot upon his chest and applying light pressure. "What guarantee do I have," she asked, voice dropping to a dangerously low tone, "that I'll leave Vale *freely*?"

"You'll have to trust me," Jaune replied, his voice tight but sincere.

Cinder scoffed, the amusement in her expression gone. "Trust you? We're not on the same side, Arc. We *hate* each other. You're just waiting for the perfect reason to get rid of me. You always keep me in eyesight, don't think I haven't noticed it. And now, after this," she pressed

her sword slightly harder, “you’ve got the perfect excuse to do what you’ve been waiting for.”

Jaune’s eyes flickered with frustration. “Do you seriously expect me not to be cautious? After everything you’ve done, after how many times you tried to kill me and my friends, of course I’m keeping an eye on you. That’s the bare minimum.”

She tilted her head, unimpressed. “You still haven’t answered my question. What’s stopping you from betraying me when the time comes?”

“I can only promise you.” Jaune could have explained that when an Arc makes a promise, he keeps it, but he doubted she would care too much.

“Not enough.”

Jaune’s patience frayed. “Then what do you want to hear?”

Cinder paused, her eyes sharpening as she lowered the blade slightly. “You’re after the Relic, aren’t you? That’s why you’re heading to Vale.”

Jaune hesitated.

“Don’t try to deny it. There’s nothing else worthwhile there, just the crown.”

“... Yes. I want the crown.”

Cinder smirked. “Then let’s make a deal.”

“A deal?” Jaune echoed, caught off guard.

“The Relic of Choice is hidden differently than the others. I can help you find it.” she offered in a smooth tone.

“I know it’s hidden differently, but I also know that the Fall Maiden is required to get it.”  
Jaune countered.

Cinder chuckled. “Oh, really?” Her amusement turned into a mocking grin. “Did the wizard tell you this? Did he also tell you where it is or how to open its vault?” *No, he did not.* “Don’t you think that he tried to deceive you?”

Jaune frowned.

“Don’t look at me like that. He and Salem have been playing this game for thousands of years. They’ve been betrayed countless times by servants, friends, and even family. Why would he tell you, to a nobody, any information about the last relic when the odds are against him? He is a wizard, Arc. And they never tell their tricks, especially their biggest one.”

He wanted to say that she was wrong, that she didn’t know Ozma, that Oscar would’ve warned him if he felt something fishy from the immortal. He wanted to tell her that she couldn’t been farther from the truth, but he couldn’t.

Jaune remembered well how angry he had once been at the ancient wizard. Choosing Pyrrha, a first-year student, to be the next Fall Maiden, knowing well how dangerous this duty was and that she wouldn't say no. Lying about the relic and endangering their life and everyone else's on Argus Limited. Who was Salem to him and that she was an immortal being. Abandoning them when all his lies had caught up to him and leaving Oscar in the epicentre of their anger.

That anger had evaporated a long time ago, but it left its mark on Jaune, and he still wished to have a *long* talk with Ozma about all this.

His resentment stopped him from defending Ozma from Cinder's accusations because he knew she might be right.

"I'll help you find the crown. In exchange, you let me leave Vale freely, you don't tell anyone I was there, and I get to use the Crown."

Jaune's eyes narrowed. "Why do you want to use it?"

"That's only for me to know. Once I used it, you can have it." Cinder replied coolly. "So, deal?"

Jaune knew he had little choice in this situation, she wouldn't accept a no. "Deal."

Cinder's grin returned, cold and calculating. "Oh, and one more thing. Before you even *think* about breaking this partnership early, and somehow, you'd manage to kill me," Her tone turned lethal. "I will make sure you regret it."

Jaune narrowed his eyes. "How?"

"By thinking Salem. She's powerful already, giving her the Maiden powers won't change much for her, but for you and your friends, this will be maybe the final nail in your coffins." She clearly felt confident that this would stop him. She wasn't wrong. This prospect was indeed a dire one for them, but he didn't want to give her the satisfaction to admit it.

"If she could have it, don't you think that she wouldn't have needed you to begin with?"

Cinder's gaze shifted and her grin fell for a moment, but a smirk formed on her lips which gave him chills. "Hm, that's true. But don't you worry, I have a better candidate for my revenge." Jaune didn't like her tone. Admitting that he could be right was strange hearing from her, and this made him worry about what would come next.

"Who?"

"Amber Arc."

The colour drained from Jaune's face and his whole body felt like made out of ice. Foggy images of a little blonde girl flashed in front of his eyes. Gods, when was the last time he had seen her? He tried to recall her voice, but he couldn't, not completely.

"...What?" he whispered once he realised what Cinder had just said.

“Amber, your little sister, the youngest one.” Cinder explained with mock sweetness. “She just started primary school, didn’t she? Imagine what would happen if *she* became the next Fall Maiden.”

Salem would hunt her.

“How do you know about her?!” Jaune demanded, panic creeping into his voice.

“Do you think Salem doesn’t keep tabs on everyone who sides with Ozma?” Cinder’s tone was casual, almost bored. This made Jaune’s previously frozen blood boil as his body tensed.

“If anything happens with her I will-”

“Will what? Kill me?” She mocked him with a laugh. “No, you won’t do that. Because she will be only safe as long as I am alive.” Her sword began to glow then fell apart into shards and flew to her forearm where reformed as it was a cast made from black glass. “And because of that, you will do anything to keep me alive.”

She removed her leg from his chest. “Isn’t it fantastic?” she asked with a grin.

No, it was definitely not fantastic. He wanted to strangle her to permanently wipe that grin off from her face. But he couldn’t do that unless he wanted his sister to be hunted.

“So, any objection?”

“None.” He had a lot.

“That’s what I thought.” she said cheekily. “Now, get up and gather your things. I want to leave as soon as Thana is back.”

Jaune watched as she walked away from him to the creek. He got up from the ground and stood there for a second, he let out a sigh in defeat.

“Did you really send her away alone?” he asked.

“The bush is not that far. I can even see her from here.” she answered from the bank, looking in the distance. Then she turned back to him with a sharp look. “Don’t just stand there, start packing!”

---

Jaune trudged along the dirt path, a few steps behind Cinder and Thana. His eyes wandered between the pair ahead, the ground, and the forest around them. His mind kept repeating the morning’s event.

After each repeat, he wanted to punch something. Mostly himself for allowing this to happen, but a rational part of him knew that this was inevitable, he had to sleep. And now he was

stuck in a deal where he had to defend her to defend his sister.

Jaune spent the road so far in silence. Cinder and Thana often chatted about things, mostly the girl asked the woman to tell her about what kind of grimm she had killed, but with less enthusiasm as yesterday.

Thana glanced back at him occasionally, then she looked at Cinder. She could sense the tense atmosphere between the two adults, but she didn't know why they were angry at each other. And Jaune hoped that it would remain that way.

Cinder had taken upon herself the role to dictate their pace and declare when and where they would rest, she was clearly confident in her newfound leadership which was no surprise for Jaune, she had always seemed like a control freak.

Every once in a while, she'd cast a glance over her shoulder at him. Her ember eye always caught his attention, but he couldn't decipher the look she gave him in those moments before she turned back. It would've been easier to figure it out if she would give him her smirk, that at least he could write off as gloating.

"Hey," Thana's voice broke the silence, startling him from his spiralling thoughts. She had stopped, pointing ahead. "Is that a village?"

Jaune blinked and looked up, following her gaze. In the distance, among the trees, he could make out the edges of buildings. Sturdy wooden houses with chimneys.

"Finally." Cinder said, her voice cutting through the quiet. "I was starting to think we'd be wandering through the woods forever. I dearly hope they have an inn."

As they approached the outskirts of the village, the smell of the forest was replaced by the smell of freshly baked bread and roasted meat with a hint of smoke. The village was separated from the forest by a simple wooden fence which – in Jaune's opinion – wasn't much with a height of one and a half metres and without guards.

As they passed through the perimeter, the locals who were on the streets took a good look at them. Given the state of the road, he deduced that travellers had become a rarity nowadays for them.

The more the trio walked in the village, the more they saw from its everyday life. People moved between the buildings, villagers going about their daily routines. A woman hanging clothes on a line, a few children running through the streets laughing. It was a nice place.

"There's the inn." Cinder said, nodding towards a small building with a weathered sign hanging from a post. The sign swung gently in the breeze, displaying the simple image of a bed and a mug of ale. "Doesn't look like much but better than the forest."

They pushed open the door to the inn, the scent of warm food felt divine for Jaune who was a bit hungry now. The common room was small but cosy, with a few tables scattered around and a crackling fire in the hearth. An elderly man stood behind the counter, polishing a mug with a cloth.

Cinder and Jaune approached the counter, Thana followed closely behind them. Cinder glanced at the innkeeper with a charming smile.

“Greetings,” she begun, “we would like to rent rooms for three people.”

The innkeeper eyed them for a moment while he continued to clean the mug. “Are you Hunters?”

“We are.” replied Jaune.

The old man hummed. “Kid’s yours?”

“No. We’re charged to take her to Vale.” answered Jaune quickly.

“She looks like you two, but you look like a bit young to have a kid this old.”

Jaune glanced back at Thana. She was still too young to have any defined facial features, but he could be wrong, he had never been good to pick up these things. But the black hair and blue eyes, yes, he could see what the innkeeper meant. He turned back, catching Cinder’s eye for a second.

“So, we can have the rooms?” he changed the subject back to the original request.

The man put down the cloth, turned around and placed the mug on a shelf behind him there were a dozen other mugs. “I don’t have three rooms for you.” He turned back. “That’s half of my capacity.”

Jaune and Cinder glanced at the empty tables. “Yes, I can see this place is quite popular.”

“Hold your horses, lass. What I meant was that I can’t give three separate rooms, but I didn’t say I won’t give any. There’s a special one for you Hunters. Four small bedrooms with single beds connected with a common room, and there is a bathroom with a shower. So far, every team liked it.”

“Then we take it for the night.” said Jaune while he pulled out his wallet.

“200 lien, dinner and breakfast included.”

A bit pricy but he didn’t complain, better than sleeping on the ground and eating canned food. Jaune handed over the money and he received the room’s key.

“Third floor. Dinner served between six and eight, breakfast from seven to nine.”

“Thanks, we’ll be here.”

---

The dinner was surprisingly good given that it was in a small village's run-down inn. It was a simple stew with beef, mushroom and carrot. It must have been cooked in the past few hours for the beef to be this tender.

Cinder was a little impressed, she hadn't expected much from the dinner given the inn's 'popularity', but the stew was rather good. It reminded her of the stews she used to make back in the hotel –back when she still worked under the Madam's thumb. Stews were practical, easy to prepare and left her free to catch up on the endless tasks that were piled onto her. Plus, as long as the food was good, the Madam left her alone.

She had a relatively good day today. She had made a good deal with Arc which ensured that he would behave, and she wouldn't have to look over her shoulder because of him. Even better, he was forced to protect her if the need would ever arise which amused her beyond belief and probably frustrated him into oblivion. And she could use the crown once they find it.

Cinder let out a content sigh.

She loved it when things went her way.

The trio finished their dinner in mostly silence, the innkeeper was busy with something in the kitchen behind the bar where he had welcomed them a few hours earlier.

Everything was calm until the inn's door opened.

Her seat was viewed the door, so she didn't need to turn her head to the man who walked. He was middle-aged, with greying hair and a thick coat draped over his broad shoulders. His boots were muddy, and his tired eyes scanned the room before landing on the bar.

"Evening." he greeted them as he passed them behind Arc.

"Joe, I'm here." he called out. Moments later the innkeeper appeared from the kitchen.

"Allen, how it's going?" asked the older man in a friendly manner.

The newcomer sat down at the bar. "As fine as anyone can be after a long day. I swear if I have to fill another document today, I'm going to murder someone." he fretted.

"Didn't you say a few weeks ago that the administration job would be easy?"

"I was bloody wrong." he declared. Cinder wasn't too interested in their conversation, but it was hard not to hear it given that the room was small, and they were close. Plus, Arc was not in a talkative mood since morning, so hearing this pointless chat was better than nothing.

"So, the usual?" asked the owner.

"Yes please."

The innkeeper turned around to grab two glasses and a black bottle, then he turned back, set down the glasses and opened the bottle.

“Speaking of usual, this is my last bottle of Vytal red. Do you know when we can expect our next shipment?” asked the older man while he poured the wine for them.

The other loudly sighed. “Not for a while. The Western Passage is gone.”

This caught her attention, and her blonde partner’s as well who spoke up. “Gone? what do you mean it’s gone?”

The two older men turned to them. “It is no longer there. The heavy rains have flooded the area, mudslides have destroyed the roads, the whole passage is a death trap now.”

Arc looked briefly at her to see her reaction. She bit her lower lip as she processed this information. If the road were destroyed, then their trip changed significantly. The blonde turned back and asked further. “Do you know when they will be repaired?”

The younger man snorted. “I wouldn’t hold my breath, kid. This time of the year is always full of storms there, if they fix them now, maybe the next storm will wash it away again in a few weeks. Happens every few years, right, Joe?”

The innkeeper nodded. “Yep. Every five, maybe ten years.”

“But when they will be fixed?”

“Between a month and a month and a half, at least,” Allen replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Maybe longer if the storms keep up.”

It was now Cinder who looked at Arc to see his face. His eyes were focused on his empty plate, but he was clearly thinking through this development. She was also trying to come up with some solution to this problem.

“If you want to go to Vale, you have to go a different way.” said the innkeeper. “At least you are not from there like that blond couple from last week.”

“The scientists?” asked the younger one.

“Yes. A bit weird people – they spent their time mainly in the forest, maybe studying the animals –.”

Cinder stopped paying attention to them as they continued their conversation at the bar, their voices now more hushed, discussing other mundane topics from last week.

“This is not good.” Jaune said quietly, his voice low so only Cinder and Thana could hear.

Cinder nodded slightly. “We have to find another way to Vale.” she murmured in response, her mind racing for alternatives.

“Let’s return to our room, we can come up with something there.” he said, and Cinder agreed.

---

Cinder freshly showered stepped out from the bathroom into the common room in her nightclothes: a simple white shirt with a black short which were given to her before they had left Antlers, her chocker around her neck. Her hair was still damp, but she didn't bother to dry it further with a towel because the rooms were comfortably warm.

She had considered to cover her injured arm with the towel – since her shirt didn't offer a means to hide it – but she deemed that she would be ridiculous walking around with a wet towel on her shoulder. Plus, it was too short to stay on her and cover her left arm.

Her arm was still noticeably red and a little sensitive to touch, but the redness had gradually started to disappear in recent weeks.

When they had arrived back in the room after dinner, she and Arc agreed to meet in the common room to talk over their options an hour later.

But when Cinder looked around, he was not here. His room's door was closed. She was tempted to march to his door and knock on it to be sure that he hadn't fallen asleep, but she chose to give him the benefit of the doubt. Also, she didn't think that the agreed time had passed.

While she waited Cinder took a closer look at the common room. It was not big or small, it was somewhere in between. A small coffee table in the middle between two cosy sofas on opposite sides, a creaky wooden floor, white walls with a few generic paintings. The bedrooms' brown doors were in the four corners.

Only one of them was slightly open – Thana's.

Cinder carefully approached the said room, paying attention to not disturb the girl with the creaky sound of the floor if she was sleeping. But when she got closer, she noticed that the lamp in the bedroom was lit. Cinder slowly opened the door and looked in.

Her eye met with Thana's blue ones; she was already in her bed under the covers.

“You should be sleeping by now.” said Cinder.

“I'm not sleepy.”

Cinder moved into the room, leaving the door open and sat down on a chair next to the bed.

“Oh, really? Aren't you tired from walking all day?”

“A little.” she admitted.

“That's why you've been quiet whole day?” Cinder inquired. Given how chatty the girl was with her last week, then with Arc yesterday, her withdrawn demeanour today was odd for Cinder.

“No.” she said quietly, avoiding eye contact.

“Then why?”

“Why are you and Jaune so angry with each other?” she asked. Thana’s eyes blinked up at her, awaiting an answer.

Cinder paused, caught off guard by the question. “Why do you think we’re angry?” she asked softly.

Thana shifted under the covers, her hands fidgeting with the edge of the blanket. “You don’t talk much. And when you do, it’s like... you’re mad. Both of you.”

Cinder exhaled quietly. She wished that she could end this conversation here, but she couldn’t. Thana seemed too curious to just drop the topic, sooner or later she would seek out Arc for an answer and Cinder had a feeling that he wouldn’t tell everything, but it would be enough to seed distrust in Thana towards her. She couldn’t lie and put the whole blame on Arc – that would put their deal at risk. Thana didn’t need to know the truth, so being vague seemed the best course for Cinder.

“I suppose we are angry.” she began after she had gathered her thoughts, “It’s a bit... complicated. He and I know each other from... school.”

“From a huntsman school?”

“Yes. From Beacon.”

“You were friends?”

“No, we were not. We just saw each other from time to time.” Emerald was the one who had done most of the networking with his and Rose’s teams. She had only read their files.

“Then why are you angry with each other? Did you date then broke up?” asked the girl out of nowhere.

“No.” she said instantly after she recovered from her momentary shock, “No, we didn’t date. The only thing that you need to know is that we did things with each other in the past that are hard to forgive or forget.”

“But now you two work together.”

“Because both of us want the same thing for the moment.” she continued after a moment, “Sometimes, you have to work with people you don’t like because there’s no other choice. That doesn’t mean the anger goes away.”

Thana looked a little unhappy about this answer. The girl probably thought that things would magically work out just because she and Arc were working together. But Cinder knew for a long time that the world they living in didn’t work that way.

“We’ll be fine,” Cinder said, a small, somewhat forced smile appearing on her lips. “Don’t worry about us.”

Thana didn't seem entirely convinced, but did she need it? Cinder didn't know. "Go to sleep, okay?" said Cinder.

The girl nodded. The woman was about to stand up when the nine years old stopped her with a request. "Would you sing for me a little?"

Thana's voice was smaller than Cinder had ever heard it in the past week, but it was strong enough to stop the dreaded Fall Maiden. She could clearly hear the vulnerability in the girl's words, the type that was hard to describe because it was so... pure. That froze Cinder on the spot.

She felt a strange discomfort creep up her spine, she couldn't find words for a few moments, mainly because she had no idea how to react to such an innocent request.

Sing?

She swallowed, keeping her expression neutral as she looked down at Thana, who was watching her with sleepy eyes that held a little anticipation for her answer.

Cinder remembered that once she had had a similar dream when she lived in Mistral. She was adopted by a lovely couple who picked her out of all of the others despite her being skinny and little, not like those window shoppers who in the end had always picked the ones who acted nice and loveable. This imaginary couple had a nice two-story tall house with a little garden which was full of blueberry bushes. Sometimes they had a cat or two, other times a dog. Sometimes she imagined that they had neither so she could have all their love and attention. She had often imagined this other life as a child. In that life, when she went to sleep, her new mother would sing her a lullaby with a lovely melody as she was falling asleep.

"I don't know any song. Sorry." Cinder finally said, her voice quieter than usual. It wasn't a lie – she had never heard one in person. The caretakers in the orphanage hadn't cared that much about them and the Madame would have mocked her if she had ever asked her. The imaginary mother's lullabies were more of a humming than singing.

Thana's face fell slightly, disappointment flickering in her eyes, but she didn't push. She just nodded, curling further under her blanket. "That's okay." she said softly, though the trace of sadness in her voice was clear.

"What's your favourite story?" Cinder asked, trying not to end the day on a sour note for the girl. She knew that people usually enjoyed talking about their favourite things.

"The Girl Who Fell Through the World." answered Thana.

Cinder's lips curved up into a smile. "Do you want to know a secret?" she asked with a conspiratorial voice.

Thana's eyes lit up a bit and nodded.

"That's my favourite too."

“Really?”

“Really. When I read the book as a kid, I always pretended that I was Alyx and I’m adventuring with the Rusted Knight in the Ever After just like Alyx did.” Cinder leaned back in the chair, recalling the few enjoyable moments in her childhood when she had been happy. “I used to picture myself travelling through the wildness of the Ever After, meeting strange creatures and solving tricky puzzles for rewards. I even made up a few places to make the journey more exciting and longer.” she explained with nostalgia in her voice.

For Cinder, The Girl Who Fell Through the World had meant an escape. A place far from the orphanage, far from Atlas, far from everything that she hated; and most importantly, she would be protected from every danger by the Rusted Knight who one day would rescue her from her adoptive family.

Or rather, just dreamed of it

“Did you manage to save the Rusted Knight from the poison?”

Cinder smiled softly, “Always. Now, try to sleep. We’ve got a long day ahead of us tomorrow.” She stood up, ready to leave the room. But before she did, Cinder paused at the foot of the bed and turned back.

“Thana?”

The girl raised her head from the pillow, her eyes meeting Cinder’s “Yes?”

Cinder hesitated for a moment, then let the words come. “How about, the next time I have a connection on my scroll, I... learn a song for you? Would you like that?”

Thana’s face lit up, her smile small but genuine. “Yes.” she whispered.

Cinder felt a strange tug at her chest. “Good.” she said softly, nodding once before turning and leaving the room.

She closed the door gently and turned towards where the sofas were.

Her gaze met with a pair of blue eyes. Arc patiently sat there, waiting for her. He too was in his sleepwear: a light grey shirt with metal grey sweatpants. On the table was a pair of glasses, a bottle of water and a large piece of paper.

“How much did you hear?” she asked in a low voice so only he could hear. She was not too comfortable that he had possibly heard her previous conversation.

For a moment he looked at her with a strange glance in his eyes then answered. “That you like Alyx’s story. But before you get mad, I had no intention to eavesdrop on you, but the door was open.”

“You could have made your presence known. Made a noise or something.” she said with a dip of heat. He had no right to listen in her business.

“Yeah, I could have, but I didn’t want to disturb you.”

She regarded him for a moment. He looked calm but guarded, his eyes were firmly on her, watching every little movement. He was expecting an outburst from her.

“Disturb us?” she echoed, her voice laced with suspicion, though she kept her tone low. “Since when are you so considerate?”

Jaune leaned back on the sofa. “I have my moments.” He glanced at the closed door behind her where Thana was now likely drifting off to sleep. “I just didn’t want to ruin your moment.”

This caught her unexpectedly. After what happened in the morning, she had thought he would make an effort to be an annoyance for her, a form of petty revenge from him. But no, after brooding for a better part of the day, he chose to be a bigger person.

Maybe this approach of his annoyed her even more.

“Fine.” she muttered, walking over to the sofa and sitting across from him. “Let’s just get to why we’re here.”

Jaune leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. In front of them was a map of northeast Sanus where the Kingdom of Vale resided. “Right. With the Western Passage out of commission, our options are limited.”

She agreed with Arc. The Western Passage was a narrow 350-kilometre-long area between the sea and the massive Tyrannus Mountains which divided the region into two. From the southern part of the kingdom, the Passage provided the shortest and the fastest way to the capital.

“The Tyrannus Mountains are out of the question, even Salem has dropped a few mentions that we do better to avoid that place. It’s filled with old Grimms, not to mention only a handful of people crossed it alive.” reasoned Cinder.

“Agreed. So, we either go west to the coast and find a town with someone who still sails to Vale, or we go northeast to go around the whole thing.”

“We won’t find anyone who would take us Vale. Dust prices skyrocketed since Atlas’ destruction; I think settlements would rather keep their dust to run their homes than put them into ships that might sink with them.” Arc looked like he wanted to interrupt her when she mentioned Atlas, but he didn’t.

“Then we go northeast and spend at least two months to get around the mountains.” he traced his finger around the mountains on the map.

“I don’t think that will be necessary.” she kept her eye on a certain part of the map that caught her attention.

“What do you mean?”

Cinder's finger tapped a place on the map. "Pandora."

"Pandora?" Arc raised an eyebrow. He looked confused for a few moments, then he figured out her plan. "You want to find a transport there?"

"Yes."

The blonde knight focused on the map for a few moments then spoke, "You think they keep their trade route up with Vale."

"The two biggest cities in the kingdom cannot just stop trading with each other, they must maintain a route via bullhead or train – even if it isn't a direct connection. Especially when one of them was built on top of a dust mine, so fuelling shipments should be a bit cheaper and easier." she elaborated.

"Not a bad idea but it's still a bit of a gamble to find transport. And Pandora is as far from here as Vale is." he said.

"Of course it's a gamble, but it's better than waiting here and hoping that the Western Passage would open soon." she countered, "At worst we won't find transport, but if we choose to go around Tyrannus, Pandora is already in our way – it's on the east side of the mountain range. We'd only lose a day or two at the most."

Arc stared at the map again. After a long pause, he sighed. "Alright. Pandora it is." He looked up at her. "But we still have a problem."

"What?" she asked confused.

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Because there's no chance in hell that they won't know who you are." he explained, "We got lucky so far. Only Roslyn found you out and she didn't have the manpower to stop you, but Pandora isn't a little town in the middle of nowhere. It's one of the big three. They must keep one eye open in case you pop up there."

Cinder's eye darkened slightly, but she didn't argue. "Then I'll keep a low profile."

"Are you sure?" he questioned like he didn't believe her.

She rolled her eye. "Yes, I am sure. After all, I did it in both Vale and Atlas. Why are you so concerned about this?"

"I'm concerned because this morning you made me your bodyguard." he said with a bit of anger, "Your security has become one of my chief problems."

She supposed his anger was justified but she wasn't going to pretend that she was sorry. "Don't be so melodramatic. People have bigger headaches than me, they'll be busy with

those.” she said confidently as she grabbed the bottle of water from the table and opened it with the help of her knees. “We will be fine.”

She was about to pour the water into the closer glass, but she misaligned the glass and the bottle’s mouth. The water missed the glass and flowed onto the table.

“Shit.” Cinder cursed.

Arc snatched up the map from the table, away from the spilt water. Cinder's jaw clenched as she wiped the water off the table with her hand. She could feel his eyes on her, watching her every move, but she refused to look at him. It wasn't the first time she had fumbled like this.

"Here." Jaune said, tossing a pillow from the couch onto the wet surface to absorb the last of the spill. His voice was surprisingly neutral, no mockery or impatience – just practicality.

She shot him a glance, irritation creeping into her expression, though more at herself than him. "I had it handled."

"Sure." he replied dryly, placing the map back on the table once it was dry enough.

It happened again.

She'd lost count of how many times since Beacon she'd had to deal with this – misjudging simple things, reaching for something and missing, bad aiming from time to time, falling because of the lack of depth perception.

It was infuriating.

Losing her eye had been a setback, and it still threw her off at the most inconvenient moments. But now it happened before someone. She had been careful to hide this handicap from the likes like Watts or that half-mad Tyrian who would have mocked her or used it against her.

“Is this because of your eye?” he asked unexpectedly.

“... Yes.”

“Does it happen –“

“Goodnight.” she interrupted him curtly and hastily retreated into her room, leaving Arc alone at the table.

Cinder shut her door behind her, leaning back against it, closing her remaining eye for a moment to collect herself. The last few minutes were an embarrassment for her. And all of this was Ruby Rose’s fault. That blasted girl had ruined her plan in the last moments and maimed her for life. Cinder had felt a great deal of satisfaction when she ‘killed’ her in that portal space, but the scythe wielder just couldn’t stay dead. No, after a few months, she just returned with the rest out of the blue. When Cinder heard of this, she had turned the sand around her into glass in seconds in the desert.

She exhaled slowly and shook her head. *Stay focused*, she reminded herself, a mantra that had helped her in the past years.

She strode to the bed which was practically calling her after two days' worth long walking. She almost jumped into it and pulled back the covers of the small, modest bed and settled herself beneath them. The warmth of the blankets wrapped around her, chasing away any concept of cold.

As Cinder closed her eye and relaxed, she slowly sank into the land of her imagination where she would meet with the knight who had never come to save her.

## Chapter End Notes

It was a fun chapter to write, especially the beginning. :D  
And in the end, we can say that Cinder is living her childhood dream, in a way.

PS, I fixed the grammar in the first five chapters where I noticed it.

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

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

*The road was longer than usual, but that didn't matter. Running was what mattered. The moon illuminated the road, but the night felt darker than ever.*

*Where were the people? Why weren't they seeing the fire?*

*The buildings lining the street were soulless. Their windows were gateways to the gaping dark abyss, which seemed to want to break out of its confinement and unleash the void.*

*Not far, on a grassy hill, a large house was ablaze, its once comforting presence consumed by roaring orange flames.*

*The buildings passed rapidly but it didn't matter because they never ended. The street was infinite, and the burning house felt farther away with every step than moments before.*

*Despite this, his legs didn't ache. There was no exhaustion, only a growing weight of hopelessness and fear.*

*"Help!" came a desperate plea. A woman's voice.*

*The endless row of houses abruptly came to an end, leaving the house dressed in flames alone.*

*His heart pounded; his breaths were shallow as he watched the crackling fire without warmth.*

*"Somebody help!" Same plea, different voice. Younger than before but achingly familiar.*

*No step happened, as if his legs were made of solid iron, welded to the ground. No matter how much intent he mustered, it couldn't turn into action. He stood numbly in front of the house.*

*"Help!"*

*"Somebody help her!"*

*The voices grew more frantic and desperate as the heatless fire was devouring the house. Its flames danced higher and higher in the starless night.*

*"Help, somebody please help!"*

*"There're grimms here!"*

*“Help her!”*

*The crackling inferno almost overwhelmed the voices that came from his home.*

*Wait, this was his home?*

*Yes, yes it was!*

*He had to get inside, but he couldn't move his legs, in fact, they felt powerless. He could barely stand, and he was seconds from collapsing to the ground.*

*“Oh, Jaune. Ever the failure, aren't you?” A voice slithered into his ears. He turned to his left and saw the Curious Cat, lazily approaching him with a self-satisfied grin.*

*“I do wonder, when will it be enough for you to realise that you cannot save anyone. You fail time and time again, yet somehow the whole world views you as one of the greatest heroes who ever lived.” The cat sat with an exaggerated yawn. “No, wait, that's the Rusted Knight. Not you.”*

*“Help us!”*

*“If only the world knew that the whole thing was just little Lewis' fantasy. A story full of lies to make his grief and regret lighter. Poor boy, he had to tell lies because you couldn't make a simple tale real.” he sighed dramatically, “But what can you expect from someone who has to be carried by his friends because otherwise he will get himself killed.”*

*Jaune wanted to interrupt him, but no voice came from his throat.*

*“You really don't have nothing to say? To your oldest friend?” he said with fake hurt in his voice, then he smiled at Jaune viciously. “Then how about to Amber?”*

*Jaune's head snapped up, only to see a young, blonde girl engulfed in flames, her agonised scream tearing through the night.*

“NOO!” yelled Jaune as he jolted awake, scrambling to his feet and nearly toppling over the table in front of him. His heart hammered against his ribs; a thin layer of cold sweat covered him. He frantically looked around only to realise that he was in the common area of their room in the local inn. He looked down at the table.

A map and a few notes.

He had fallen asleep while plotting their route to Pandora on the map.

On his left, the door swung open and Cinder stormed into the room with her blazing obsidian sword, ready to strike. Her messy hair fell in dark waves around her face as she scanned the room, her burning gaze flickering from corner to corner before finally settling on him. Her grip on the hilt relaxed slightly, but the intensity in her eyes didn't fade away like the flames did.

“Care to explain why you are screaming in the morning?” she demanded.

Jaune swallowed, feeling his throat dry. He didn't want to admit that he'd been rattled like this by something as laughable as a nightmare, especially not in front of her. But he couldn't give her any other explanation. "J-Just a bad dream. Nothing serious." he muttered with a little shame.

"A bad dream?" she echoed, raising an eyebrow. She disintegrated her weapon into an onyx forearm bracelet but stayed where she stood. "You woke me up by screaming because you had a bad dream?"

"...Yeah." Jaune sighed as he ran a hand through his messy, white streaked blonde hair.

"How old are you, five?"

"Still better than waking up with a sword to your neck." he shot back, his voice tinged with irritation.

"How very mature of you." she retorted, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

"Don't make a big deal out of this. Look, I'm sorry if I cut short your beauty sleep. Next time, I'll make sure to not disturb you." He really hoped there wouldn't be a next time. This was already uncomfortable for him.

She slightly narrowed her eye. "It's not about me sleeping enough, it's about you being a walking mess."

"What's that supposed to mean?" irritation slipped into his voice fully, glaring at her.

"Oh, so you want to pretend that everything is fine? Alright, let us pretend. Then tell me why you are acting strangely since we've met?"

"I don't act strangely." he deflected. Nothing was out of the ordinary.

"Of course. And you didn't lie about us in Antlers, you didn't abandon your merry little band and run away, you didn't have that episode with Thana yesterday either. And you most certainly do not have night terrors and not afraid of sleeping." listed Cinder.

"Why do you care?" snapped Jaune.

"I don't." shot back Cinder, "But this journey is already difficult and the last thing I need is you to become a liability for me."

His previous irritation turned into anger. How did she dare call him a liability? Half of his and the world's problems existed because of her. She was the one who had decided to sell her soul to the Queen of all evil. The one who had killed countless people for the Maidens' power. Vale, Mistral, Atlas and Mantle, only Vacuo remained untouched by her. And she had the gall to call him a liability when she was the reason he was trapped... *there* the way he was. With his guilt. Alone.

*Alone.*

Any problem she had with him was her fault and hers alone.

“A liability? That’s rich coming from you.” he scoffed, “Who is wanted all around Remnant from the two of us? Certainly not me. And let’s not forget where we are going. The closer we will get to Pandora the bigger liability you will become.”

Instead of the expected angry remark, she just smirked at him smugly. “Then you do better to watch my back, Arc. After all Amber’s future depends on what happens to me.”

For a brief moment, he thought that he would lose his control and grab Crocea Mors and run it through her. Luckily for her, the sword was still in his room, so he couldn’t act on his impulses. Not like he would have actually done it. She truly had a tight leash on him with Amber, an ace that she could use in every disagreement. And he had nothing to counter it.

A knock interrupted his thoughts.

Both of their attention turned to the door.

“Are you expecting someone?” queried Cinder.

“No.” replied Jaune with a measured tone. “You?”

“No.”

The knock came again, sharper this time.

“Are you going to stand there all day, or are you planning to answer it?” Jaune snapped his head back at her. She was only awake for a few minutes, but he had enough of her already. She may have forced him to be her bodyguard, but he was not her servant.

“You don’t have legs or what?” snarked back Jaune.

Cinder met his gaze. “I am not dressed to receive guests.” she waved her hand over her attire, “I don’t like to speak with strangers in my sleeping clothes. It must be strange for you but some of us have a certain level of decorum, Arc. Something that you are clearly missing.” her tone laced with mockery and self-imagined superiority.

Jaune ignored her jab. Reacting to her insults only fuelled her further. He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. He walked over the door but as he passed her, he gave her a glare which she met with an annoying smile.

He unlocked the door and opened it just enough to see who was there. It was the same man from yesterday who told them about the Western Passage. “Good morning. I hope I didn’t wake you up.”

“No, you didn’t.” Jaune was taken aback a little, he did not expect to see him again. Maybe he had slept in the inn and Jaune woke him too up with his shouting. That would have explained the man’s question, but his tone was sincere, not passive-aggressive. Plus, he was dressed up in a simple blue shirt with a farmer. He was up longer than Jaune was. What did he want? “Can I help you?”

“Hopefully. Can I come in?”

Jaune didn't answer or move immediately. Why should he let him in? He looked back to the raven haired woman for an answer who was still on her room's threshold, leaning against the doorway. Their gaze met but neither of them had a definite response to the request. After a few moments, Cinder shrugged her shoulders, then returned to her room and closed the door.

The knight turned back to the man who still waited for an answer. It arrived when Jaune pushed the door open to let him in.

“Thank you.” he murmured as he passed Jaune, “I'm sorry to disturb you this early in the morning but I had to catch you before you leave.”

“What happened? You said you need my help” said Jaune and closed the door. The man sat down on one of the couches, Jaune took the other one.

“Yes. Uh, your partner is awake? This might involve her too.” he asked, looking around.

“She's – ”

“– here.” answered Cinder as she opened the door. She changed into her clothes from yesterday.

“Excellent! Once again, I'm sorry to disturb you but as I said I might need your help.”

“About what, Mr....” said Jaune.

“Please call me Allan.” he offered.

“Allen then. I'm Jaune and this is... Cindy.” introduced themselves Jaune. As he told Cinder yesterday and today, she was a wanted person so giving Allen a fake name seemed appropriate. And the look on her face when she heard her new name was quite amusing. She gave a curt nod, masking her irritation with a neutral expression.

Allen returned the gesture. “Yesterday, after you left, I continued to talk with Joe and he mentioned that the two of you are hunters, correct?”

“Yes.” Jaune confirmed.

“Then I wish to hire you for a job.” Allen revealed, “Late night I got a call from Mr. Zong – the local hermit if you will. He claimed that he had heard some kind of Grimm not far from his cabin and he asked for someone to check it out.”

“And you thought of us.” said Cinder who took a seat on the opposite end of the couch where Jaune sat.

“Yes, I did. My first thing in the morning was to come here to ask your help.” he claimed, “Maybe it's nothing, Mr. Zong is in age and solitude can cause problems on its own, but if something happens to him and I did nothing, then... that's on me. And I don't wish to have that on my conscience. So, are you willing to take the job?”

“Where does he live exactly?” asked Cinder. Her question surprised Jaune. Why did she even entertain the idea? She was not the kind of person who would help people. However, that was Jaune’s opinion or rather his experience with the Maiden after the Vytal Tournament’s final. But before that, she had successfully maintained her cover as a Huntress, even Ozpin and Ironwood had been unable to find her, and he knew from Ruby that Cinder and her team had helped during the Breach.

“He lives in the forest, west of here. A few hours walk.”

“That might be problematic. You sure remember there was a third person with us at dinner – a girl. We can’t take a child with us to Grimm hunting for obvious reasons, and we don’t really feel comfortable leaving her here alone since we were charged to take care of her.” she explained. For Jaune, she sounded caring, which was so unlike her. But when it came to Thana, it was clear Cinder had a soft spot.

“I can help with that. We have someone who looks after the local’s children until their parents finish their jobs, she can easily look after her too until you’re away.” Allen offered keenly with a smile.

Jaune’s attention turned fully to Cinder. Her eye was focused on the table which separated the couches, biting her lower lip. Was she truly considering accepting it?

“What’s the wage?” she inquired. She *was* considering. It was fair to say Jaune was mildly surprised. Cinder Fall was willing to help once again – of course not for free, but still.

“800 lien.” said Allen.

“1500 lien.” countered Cinder in a heartbeat.

Allen blinked. “1500?” he echoed back in disbelief.

“1500 if it’s nothing, 2000 lien if it’s a Beowolf and the price goes up with rarity and numbers.” she corrected him. Jaune was speechless, Cinder’s offer stunned him for a moment.

“I-It’s too much. How about 1000 and 1400 liens?” Allen bargained.

Cinder laughed but it contained little humour or warmth. “So, your conscience has a price after all? 1400 and 1900.”

“1100 and 1500. I can’t offer any more.”

“Then I hope Mr. Zong is just senile and didn’t hear anything because we won’t go. Walking for hours just to chase the fantasies of an old man who ate some mushrooms in the forest or wants a little attention is pointless for us. We already have a well-paying job that is time-sensitive, so we won’t waste our time with something that even you don’t take seriously and spend half a day here for nothing. But if you *do* take this seriously, our prices contain the potential wasted time and cover the Dust’s cost – which has become rather expansive in the past months – if there are Grimm there.” explained Cinder.

Jaune had to admit, her reasoning was convincing and logical. He had no big desire to check on an old hermit who might have heard something, something that even Allen did not take seriously – that was a mistake to admit if he truly wanted them to look on the old man. But even if it was a false alarm, Jaune’s morals dictated to make sure that the hermit had heard was not Grimm. It was his duty as a Huntsman.

Allen was silently considering Cinder’s offer. His eyes didn’t meet theirs, rather they were cast down to the table. They didn’t seem focused; he was deep in his thoughts.

The man across sighed after half a minute. “1300 and 1700 is my final offer, and... a free night in the inn. I don’t know if you have taken a look outside yet, but the weather is rather overcast, there can be rain later, maybe at night. Spending an extra night here is better than getting soaked in the woods.” suggested Allan.

Cinder took a moment to think it over, then she gave him her answer. “Deal.”

Allen let out a relieved breath, standing up and smoothing out his blue shirt. “Thank you. I’ll inform Mr. Zong that help is on the way. He’ll be grateful to know that professionals are handling the situation.”

Cinder leaned back on the couch, a fake smile playing on her lips. “We’ll head out in a couple of hours. Let him know to expect us around noon.”

Allen nodded. “I’ll leave you to prepare.” He made his way to the door but stopped just before opening it. “Just make sure that he will be fine. He maybe lives out there, but he is one of ours.”

With that, he stepped out, closing the door behind him.

Cinder scoffed and stood up. “What a lovely sentiment. I’d almost believe him if he wasn’t trying to cut corners on us.”

Jaune didn’t comment on this; he was rather mentally preparing for the coming hours. He would have to check his gear, get dressed, bring the compass, and bring a little snack to eat it for lunch in front of Cinder, he mused because she didn’t seem the kind of person who would pack food. And, of course, take Thana to that daycare thing.

“Do you think Thana is still asleep?” he asked without thinking.

Cinder turned to him with an unimpressive look on her face. “After you screamed like a lunatic, our argument after that, and this little business meeting we just had?” She arched a brow. It was at this moment that Jaune knew he shouldn’t have asked. “Yes, Arc. She’s still asleep. Because she’s deaf.”

“I hate you.”

---

“Are you sure I can’t go with you?” Thana asked with big, sad eyes. “I can help.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s too dangerous for you to come with us. We don’t know what we’re up against, and you’ll be safe here.” replied Jaune. This did little to convince the girl.

Cinder, Jaune and Thana stood in front of the gate of a nice wooden house. Its door was painted dark green, pelargonium on the windowsill, and white fences surrounded the house and the garden. The woman in charge waited patiently for them to finish saying goodbye.

Cinder let out a soft sigh next to Jaune, she stepped forward and knelt before Thana. Her expression softened, and her voice lost its usual sharp edge and superiority. “Thana, you don’t need to worry about us.”

The young girl’s lips pressed together, her eyes flickering between them. “I don’t want you to go without me.” she said firmly.

Cinder tilted her head slightly; with her lone hand, she tucked an unruly lock of black hair behind Thana’s ear. This whole scene almost looked motherly for Jaune. “I know, little shadow. And we don’t want to leave you here either, but this is our job. This is part of being a Huntress, we go out there, so others don’t have to.”

Thana frowned, her resolve faltering. “But what if... what if you don’t come back?” she worried in a small voice.

Jaune stepped forward and knelt beside Cinder. “Thana, we will come back. I promise. But this is something we have to handle on our own. It’s dangerous out there, and we won’t risk anything happening to you.” he said warmly, but her frown remained. She avoided their eyes, but he could see the sadness in them. She was afraid they would never come back. And she would be alone once more.

Jaune had an idea.

“How about I leave something with you?” She looked up to him with a puzzled gaze. Jaune smiled softly, untying the red sash around his waist and pulled it out from under the belt that held his sword. “This belonged to someone very important to me. She was the bravest and the kindest person that I’ve ever met.” He looped the red fabric around Thana’s waist twice to fit her. Cinder silently watched their interaction, her eye focused on the sash. “I need you to hold onto it for me, okay? When we come back, I’ll ask it back.”

“You promise?”

“We promise.” spoke Cinder, her voice was tender. “And when we come back, we’ll tell you everything. Deal?”

Thana hesitated, then nodded reluctantly. “Deal.” she whispered.

The older woman stepped closer as she saw they had finished. “Don’t you worry, sweetie. The Grimm won’t stand a chance. They will be back before you know it.” she said kindly. “Come.”

Thana glanced up at her, then back at Jaune and Cinder. It looked like she wanted to say something but, in the end, she decided otherwise, she joined the matron and left towards the house.

Cinder and Jaune rose to their feet. She didn't meet Jaune's eyes, her gaze fixed on the now-closed door. After a moment she spoke, her tone brisk. "Let's get going."

---

A swift wind swept among the trees, shaking the branches and leaves with cool air. This was not the first bigger gust of air. In the past ninety minutes, since they had left the nameless village, their number, speed, and length had grown steadily. The temperature had also dropped a few degrees since then.

Jaune peered at the sky as much as the trees allowed with uneasiness. Dim light shone through across the leaves. The blue heavens were obstructed by white and light grey clouds that stretched as far as he could see. It looked like something was flying above the clouds and casting its shadow on them. This seemingly endless cloud cover was so thick that he couldn't even tell where the sun was. Only thanks to his scroll did he know the time. It was almost noon.

His companion walked along with him; the trail was barely visible but clearly taken care of. The grass was shorter, no big fallen branches in the way, and these signs continued towards west where the hermit lived. Probably Cinder was on the same conclusion because she didn't say otherwise so far.

They hadn't said a word to each other since they entered the forest. Because of this and the monotony of the path, his mind wondered about various things. The weather, how old some bigger trees were here, why would an old man live alone in a forest, and how nice a lighter armor would be. But there was one thing that made him wonder aloud.

"Little shadow."

"What?"

"Little shadow." he repeated, "That's how you called Thana in the morning."

Cinder glanced his way for a moment. "Yes, I did. What of it?"

"Where does it come from?"

He thought she wasn't going to answer as she continued to walk in silence with an unreadable expression, but a moment later she sighed. "When I was leading the refugee group from Antlers, she was with me all the time. Asking about being a Huntress, about Vale and the other big cities, and many other things that she had been nagging you with too. I

hardly had time on my own. Same thing yesterday while you were sulking in the back, she was at my side. She is like my shadow, always there, I cannot get rid of her. Hence..."

"...little shadow." finished Jaune. "It's surprisingly nice of you." he added.

She narrowed her eye. "I can be nice. And I have no reason not to be with Thana."

"You like her, and she likes you, too." Cinder had been gentler with the girl than he could have ever imagined her to be able to. Back in Atlas, they had a brief chance to ask Emerald a few questions, among them about Cinder. And her answers painted a darker picture of Cinder – if it was even possible. How she had treated her and Mercury, how she had manipulated them.

"Of course she does, she is an orphan. Besides us, she has literally no one." Her voice turned softer, and somehow a little sad, almost melancholy, "We probably mean the world for her."

"We?" Jaune raised an eyebrow. "She's obviously closer with you than with me." said Jaune. The conversation they had last night was a proof of this. When he had heard what Thana was asking, it felt like he was listening to something he shouldn't be. Something sacred.

"After you tried to make her relive the worst day in her life, don't be surprised if she keeps a little distance from you." she chided him. "You should try to make amends."

Jaune winced. She was right, damn it. Maybe he could offer her to show some simple fight techniques, she seemed to be entertained the thought of being a Huntress. Maybe even with Crocea Mors since it was not a heavy blade. Not anymore.

After a few more minutes of walking and a steep hill climbing, Cinder started losing her patience. "Ugh, how long have we been walking?"

"Almost two hours, I guess."

"I should have demanded more lien for this."

"You already have asked a hefty price. Blaming the Dust's cost when neither of us using any."

She scoffed. "Let's get one thing straight, Arc. This isn't about 'helping' anyone. I'm no one's saviour. It's about one thing: me, making enough money to disappear after Vale and never see each other again."

Jaune frowned. "Still, 1300 lien for nothing? Feels like we're robbing them." Settlements like this had little to no income in terms of money. No special product or food that could generate commerce or major trading routes. The inn was probably the only place that saw any decent money transfer by the few travellers who chose to stay there for a night.

Cinder smirked. "Not the worst analogy. If it is nothing, we walk away richer for a stroll through the woods. If it's Grimm, we're compensated fairly for the danger. Either way, we win."

Before Jaune could respond, Cinder stopped abruptly.

“Huh, do you see that?” asked Cinder. He followed her gaze, there was a hole in the canopy that gave them a view of a nearby hill. It was around 200 meters tall and mostly covered by trees. But the interesting thing that stopped Cinder was the structure that perched at its peak.

A metal tower.

Grey metal rods formed its frame, arranged in the usual zig-tag way until its top, which was slightly narrower than the bottom. On its highest point, there were several antenna dishes with a faint, twinkling red light. It stood out starkly against the natural surroundings.

“What’s that?” asked Jaune. He squinted to see more detail. “It looks like a radio tower.”

“Yes, it looks like it.” agreed Cinder, still studying the metal structure. “And it’s not that old either. The steel is still clean, if it were built a few years ago, then there would be signs of erosion or rusting, I think. Or at least not that shining. It’s new. Brand new.”

Jaune took out his scroll and brought it to life. The local network’s strength was very strong, every signal bar was lit. “It’s that bridge network that woman spoke of in the Huntsman Office, a relay of it!” he said, holding up the device for Cinder to see. “I have full signal strength.”

Cinder’s lone amber eye flicked to the scroll and then back to the tower. “After the CCT, it’s certainly a setback.” she said unimpressed. “Are they even guard it?”

“Doubt it. We’re in the middle of nowhere. Posting soldiers here would be foolish unless they have aura and training against Grimms but sending those here would be even bigger stupidity. They’d need them for more important stuff than guarding a tower in a forest.”

“Whatever it is, it isn’t our problem, and by the way, you’re wrong. I did calculate the Dust’s price into the offer.” Cinder informed him, then she continued walking. Leaving Jaune behind a few steps.

He was confused by the sudden change of topic and what she was saying. “What do you mean? You have magic, the Maiden’s power. As far as I’m aware summoning swords, glass shards and fire doesn’t require Dust for you.”

Cinder shook her head in annoyance. “I wasn’t talking about myself. I was talking about you. In Atlas, you used Dust in your shield when we fought. Gravity and hard light. Did you forget already, it wasn’t that long ago.”

*Yes, it was*, he wanted to say but in the end he said nothing. She wasn’t wrong, he had used Dust during their battle in Atlas. But honestly, he had forgotten some details of their fight – among a few other things. His shield’s Dust capabilities were one of those. He had depleted them on that day and his prison had no Dust. Only when they had returned to Vacuo and Weiss asked him if he needed Dust for his shield he remembered after a brief second of confusion that he could use Dust. Pietro had upgraded Crocea Mors in Atlas.

He had a few vials of both gravity and light with him, but he hadn't really used them since his return. It felt alien for his style, and he usually forgot about it in combat. Not to mention how expensive they were.

Cinder slowed her pace but didn't turn to face him. "You're awfully quiet. No other immoral matter you wish to talk about?"

He sighed, adjusting the straps on his gear as they trudged along the trail. "Not really. I'm just... thinking."

"About?"

"Stuff." he replied with an even tone, indicating he wouldn't speak about it.

She didn't push the topic further, she hummed. "Well then, save the self-reflection for later. I think we're here."

The trees seemed older here, ancient even. Their thick trunks were twisted and gnarled with patches of moss and lichen, and their upper branches were dancing in the wind. Ahead, a modest cabin came into view. It was a weathered structure; its wooden walls lost their original colour from years of exposure to the elements. A thin plume of smoke rose from the stone chimney.

"That must be it."

"Let's hope this hermit has something more than tall tales to share and we didn't waste two hours for nothing." A stronger wind swept through the tree trunks, rattling branches. The leaves heavily moved against each other; the cool air had the faint, earthy scent of petrichor. It looked like Allen's weather forecast was correct, there was going to be rain. Overhead, the sky darkened further, heavy clouds gathering, they were more grey than white.

Jaune's uneasiness was growing by the second. The fresh air felt suffocating, and he wanted nothing more than to return to the inn to spend the day away from the coming storm. His throat was dry, but he forced himself to speak.

"Let's get over with it." And with that, they made their way to the cabin.

## Chapter End Notes

Well, it was exactly one year ago that I wrote the first chapter of my very first story—this one. It feels like the perfect time to publish the final chapter of the year. After 48k words and 9 chapters, the story is still ongoing and far from finished. To those who've been here since the beginning and those who joined along the way, thank you for your

support in whatever form it's taken. I hope the story and its direction remain engaging enough for you to see where the next year takes us.

Happy holidays to everyone! See you in the next year.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

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

They approached the cabin. The structure was even more derelict up close, with moss creeping up its walls and the smell of rotting wood hitting his nose.

Jaune knocked on the door.

A shuffle from inside was followed by the clatter of what sounded like glasses. Moments later, the door creaked open and revealed an elderly man, wearing old style clothes which Jaune had only seen in old films. His face was wrinkled, mostly covered by a white beard. He looked them over.

“Yes, what is it? What you want?” he asked impatiently, his voice raspy.

“Allen sent us.” replied Jaune.

“Ah, you must be the hunters Allen mentioned.” Mr. Zong said, “Come in, come in. We shouldn’t talk out here.”

The cabin’s interior didn’t look better than its exterior, but the rotting wood’s smell was definitely stronger. Shelves filled with jars of herbs and trinkets lined the walls, a small fire crackled in the stone hearth, above it a hunting rifle hung on the wall. Mr. Zong gestured to a pair of chairs near the fire at a table while he muttered something under his nose.

Cinder and Jaune took their seat, but the old man didn’t join them. It appeared he was looking for something in a chest next to the door, then when he didn’t find it, he turned his attention to the shelves above it. The muttering didn’t stop, like he forgot they were there.

This didn’t bode well, Jaune thought.

When Jaune turned to Cinder she was already looking at him with a gaze that indicated she was on the same page as him. Her lips pressed into a tight line as she leaned back in her chair.

Jaune sighed, knowing that this was going to be a difficult conversation. “Mr. Zong.” Jaune called him.

“... not... remember... tree...” mumbled Zong who was scribbling something into a little notebook.

“Mr. Zong.” Jaune called louder.

“... stars... wake... night...”

“Mr. Zong!” snapped Jaune.

He stopped the mumbling and turned around, there was a moment of surprise in his eyes that they were here. But as fast as it appeared as fast it disappeared, and a slight confusion sat on his face. He had forgotten about them.

“Mr. Zong, Allen sent us to investigate the sound that you heard last night. Do you remember? You said it was from a Grimm.” Jaune hoped giving the old man enough information would make him remember the last night or at least stay with them in the present. If they were already here, they could hear him out.

“Last night?” he said uncertainly.

“Yes.” Jaune said, leaning forward slightly. “It was late. You called Allen in the nearby village, and he called you back today to expect us.”

His confusion transformed into recognition. “Ah, yes, yes, I remember now.” Zong said with a laugh, waving a hand dismissively. “It’s hard to remember everything when you’ve got so many more important things on your mind, you know!” he explained and brought a third chair to the table. He sat down opposite them.

Jaune gave him a small, tight smile and hummed in a fake agreement. “Sure, but could you tell us about last night.”

“Of course, my boy!” Mr. Zong exclaimed enthusiastically, “It was like most of the night this time around. Despite how nice the weather was, my knee ached all day like always when rain’s coming – it still does. It has never let me astray yet. My grandfather was the same back when we still lived in Mistral, usually a little fried rice had always helped him when it got bad. I miss a good bowl of rice, ever since we moved to Vale, I haven’t had a good fried rice. Vale just doesn’t have –”

Jaune’s attention drifted as the old man rambled on, his hand on the table proved to be more interesting for him. He didn’t even pretend to listen. Jaune turned his attention to his partner on his right.

Cinder tapped her finger lightly on the table, her expression was unreadable, but her narrowed eye betrayed her growing irritation. When Zong paused to catch his breath, she leaned forward, her voice cutting through the old man’s musings.

“Tell us about the sound you heard last night.” she said before he could continue his rambling.

Zong blinked, seemingly snapping back to the present. “Oh, right! The sound! Yes, it was... weird. A howl, but not like any Grimm I’ve heard before. Maybe it was closer to a roar than to a howl. And it almost sounded like human.”

“Human?” asked Jaune, finally drawn back into the conversation.

“Aye. And what is strange too is that it came from the direction of the Witch Hill.” Zong said it in a low voice.

“Witch Hill?”

“Yes. Legend has it, a witch once lived in these woods with her four children. One day, she went to a nearby village to help someone who was sick. While she was away, a great forest fire broke out. It burned down half the forest, including her home and children. She went mad in grief, and she started looking for a way to bring her children back from the dead.”

“Let me guess, she found one, didn’t she?”

“Aye. Darkest of dark magic according to the tale – blood sacrifices. She lured and kidnapped eight children from nearby villages, two for each of her own. She chose the top of a hill for the ritual. It happened just after the sun dipped below the horizon. She hanged them from four trees on the hill and slit their wrists, soaking the trees’ roots with blood. But the villagers caught her before she could finish. They killed her and burned the trees down. They say her ghost still haunts that hill, bound until her children return to the land of the living.”

“...Yes, thank you for the story.” Jaune said, glancing at Cinder who looked like she wished to be anywhere else but here. “I’m sure it will be... helpful. Where is this hill exactly?”

“South from here. You cannot miss it.”

South from here? Jaune had a feeling that they had seen this hill already. “By any chance, is this Witch Hill the same hill with the big radio tower on it?”

“That’s the one! Those city folks are asking for trouble by putting there that thing. Disturbing the spirits this way will bring that thing trouble.” he warned.

“So far works just fine as much as we've seen.”

“So far.” repeated Zong ominously.

Cinder rose from her chair, using the momentary pause to end this conversation. “We’ll keep that in mind, but now it’d better for us to move on until it gets dark.”

Jaune followed suit, adjusting his sword on his hip. “Thanks again for your time, Mr. Zong. We’ll get started right away and find what caused that sound.”

As they turned to leave, Zong spoke up unexpectedly. “Wait.” Jaune turned to him. Zong’s gaze was transfixed on Jaune. “What’s that?” he pointed with a trembling finger on his weapon.

Jaune paused, glancing down. “My... weapon? It’s a sword with a collapsible shield that acts as a scabbard for the sword.”

“Open it.” said Zong, still staring at Crocea Mors.

“Uhm, okay.” Jaune agreed a bit confused. He unclipped the scabbard from his belt and put it on his left arm. Then he activated the mechanism that smoothly unfolded the shield in front of him.

There was no reaction on the old man’s face. The only noticeable change was the slightly widened eyes and a louder breathing. He just continued to stare at the shield.

Jaune was at a loss for what to do next. Glancing at Cinder didn’t help solve this question, she seemed just as puzzled, her brows furrowed as she observed the scene.

“Mr. Zong are you alright?” asked Jaune with a little concern in his voice.

“Get out.” whispered Zong, still looking at the white shield.

“Excuse me?”

“GET OUT!” he bellowed. He was no longer focused on the shield but on Jaune, eyes filled with barely contained fury, his visible face was steadily turning red – a strong contrast against his white beard.

Startled, Jaune quickly folded the shield back into its scabbard mode. “I’m sorry.” said Jaune in haste to calm the older man down, “I didn’t mean to upset you.” he said cautiously, holding up his hands in a placating gesture.

“OUT!” Zong shouted, rising from his chair. “Get out of my cabin! Both of you!” He pointed at the door with a shaking hand.

Cinder frowned, her amber eye narrowing. “We didn’t mean any offence. What’s your problem?”

“You!” Zong barked, glaring at Jaune with a mix of fear, anger, and hate. “You’re the problem! Just leave. Now!”

Jaune hesitated, confusion written across his face. What did he do? He tried to get an answer. “But –”

“OUT!” Zong roared again louder, his voice cracking under the strain.

“Alright.” replied Jaune, “We’re leaving.” Slowly, he and Cinder backed toward the door, careful not to fully turn their backs on the agitated old man. Once they were out, the door slammed shut behind them so strong that even the ground vibrated under their feet.

“What was that?” asked Cinder a few moments later. They were standing a few meters away from the door.

“I don’t know.” said Jaune, his expression still puzzled. He glanced back at the cabin, catching a glimpse of Zong peering at them through the curtains. The man’s face was partially obscured, but the hate was evident.

“What’s on your shield that had him freaked out?” Jaune turned to Cinder. She looked curiously in his eyes then at his hip.

He tilted his head slightly, signalling to her that he didn’t want to discuss this in front of the house. They went well behind the treeline where they were well out of Mr Zong’s view.

“So?” she asked, a hint of impatience in her voice.

“I have no idea what made him this upset. The only thing on it is my family’s crest.”

Cinder was silent but she was clearly thinking, she was once again biting her lower lip. Then her gaze lowered to Crocea Mors. “Show me.”

He sighed. He unclipped the scabbard and opened it again. Cinder's eye scanned it for a few seconds, from left to right, from top to bottom. She studied the crest for a little, she even tilted her head slightly. He saw a little sign of recognition on her face as her brow raised a few millimeters, her eye flickered at him then back to the crest. Afterwards, she shifted her gaze lower. Where *her* memento was. Then, like it was radiating a blinding light, she quickly tore her gaze away, but she avoided looking at him, or the shield.

Jaune didn’t know why she reacted this way, maybe it was guilt or regret. She had shown something similar when he had told her about the refugee group’s fate. Whatever made her want to restart, maybe it made her reevaluate her past decisions.

Or maybe this thought was just a misguided attempt to see something in her that just did not exist. Seeing the good in people. A habit he had thought got rid of, but it appeared a few months with his friends had brought back a semblance of it.

He chose not to mention it, she would deny it or make her hostile for the next couple of hours.

“So? Anything?” he asked, turning back the topic to what had happened. “I’ve never seen someone react this way to the Arc crest.”

At first, he thought he would receive silent treatment for the rest of the day as she didn’t answer him, but then she glanced at him. “I have no idea either. It’s minimalistic and simple enough to mistake for something else that someone else uses. Even I’ve seen something similar on old banners. He probably confused it with something from his past.” She turned away, already walking back toward the path. “Let’s move on. We’ve stayed here long enough.”

Jaune lingered for a moment, glancing back toward the cabin. He couldn’t shake the feeling that Zong’s reaction was more than a simple misunderstanding. With a sigh, he secured Crocea Mors back at his hip and followed after Cinder.

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The weather was definitely getting worse. It had gotten way darker despite it was just late afternoon, the clouds above felt more menacing and darker than an hour ago. The wind was now non-stop blowing – although not always with big intensity but the branches were continuously dancing in the wind. They couldn't hear anything else but how the wind twisted the trees in the forest.

Jaune was glad that it was not autumn, otherwise, they couldn't see the path because of the falling leaves.

The anxiety that he had felt for hours caused by the stormy weather had doubled. It helped that he had something to focus on.

His mind was still on what the man said to them before he sent them away. There was a little voice back in his head that told him that something was off. It had helped him to survive before Team RWBY had shown up, he trusted that voice. On the way back he had checked the ground for any track that would help him figure out this mystery, any footprint that could've been made by Grimm, but he had only seen theirs so far.

He was missing something, but he couldn't put a finger on it.

Soon they reached what looked like a junction. One path led back to the village. The other headed south. To the Witch Hill. To the tower.

He stopped.

Moments later Cinder noticed his absence and turned around. "What is it?" she asked, standing on the village road.

"That one leads to the hill." He nodded to the southern road.

She groaned. "No, Arc. That man was clearly crazy and that whole tale of his about the strange 'roar' was nothing just that. A tale."

"Don't you find it interesting that what he heard came from the same direction as the communication tower? I think we should check it out. Just to be sure."

"No, I do not find it interesting. I think it explains pretty much everything that he claims he heard yesterday." Jaune waved his hand that he wished to hear it. "The tower is brand new. Maybe even unfinished at some points. I think the construction is still ongoing and the sound was probably made by the crew up there. It's also explained why that 'roar' sounded human; it was them who made it."

"Okay, it was them." he agreed for the sake of the argument, "Why would they shout at late night? Why would they work at night?"

"They're behind schedule." she speculated with a shrug.

"Or something might have happened to them." countered Jaune.

Cinder gave him a hard look. “No, Arc. Our job was only to check on the old man, not on the tower.”

“Don’t you think they could be connected?”

“I wouldn’t care that much even if the Grimm left us somewhere a detailed plan of how they’ll attack that tower.”

He rolled his eyes. “Look at this way,” began Jaune, “we can ask for some extra cash if I’m right.”

“And if you’re not?” she shot back, “We walked enough already for the day, adding an hour to this will only just tire us more for nothing.” She turned around and started walking again in the village’s direction. Jaune’s instincts told him that something was going on that hill, he couldn’t turn away and ignore it.

“We could say we find Grimms.” he spoke up. Cinder stopped. “We could say it was an alpha Beowulf, or an Ursa.

She turned around and looked at him with frowned brow. “What are you saying?”

He was not proud of what he was about to propose. “Come with me to the hill and check out if I am right. Whether my hunch is true or not, we’ll say that there were Grimms near the hill, we pick something from the unusual ones to match up with Zong’s strange roar. Either way, we can ask for more lien for our trouble as you agreed with Allen in the morning”

Cinder stared at him strangely. The wind tugged at her black hair, almost shielding her face entirely, just her eye was uncovered. Then, to his surprise, she laughed. Not the usual ‘evil laugh’ that she had always done before, but an actually genuine laugh. “Barely a week with me, and I’m already corrupting you, Arc. Wicked lies and all.” she chuckled, “My, my, what an immoral idea from you. Colour me impressed.”

“This is a yes or a no?”

Her eye roamed over the other path, Jaune knew she was on the fence, so he gave her the push that might just work.

“If I’m wrong and nothing is there, then you can keep my part of the reward.” he offered.

She tilted her head, studying him with a mix of amusement and calculation. She brushed away a few strands of wind-tousled hair from her face. “That’s quite the gamble. I didn’t think you were the betting type.” she mused.

“Because I am not” he replied. He knew he was right.

Cinder tapped her chin theatrically, pretending to weigh the options. “Fine.” she said at last, her tone casual. “You’ve piqued my curiosity. Let’s go and see what nonsense this is.”

Jaune let out a small sigh of relief. “Thanks.” If something was truly there, he felt more confident with a Maiden on his side.

“Don’t thank me.” she quipped, already heading toward the southern path. “At least I can use your part to buy myself new clothes that are easier to put on with one hand and a bit warmer.” She rubbed her arm, the chill in the air clearly bothering her. “Shame that I lost my clothes to that Grimm attack, especially that nice glove. The ones I was given in Antlers are not exactly my taste.”

“I didn’t know you had the time for shopping gloves.” he said when he caught up to her. The path leading to Witch Hill was narrow and overgrown, the trees on either side were looming over the road and them. The further they walked, the darker the forest seemed to grow.

“I wouldn’t say shopping. I didn’t really have that many liens on me.”

“You mean you stole them?” he asked with a little surprise. It was hard to imagine Cinder Fall stealing clothes and gloves. Then, like a lightbulb switching on, he remembered a conversation he’d overheard not too long ago.

*“...He must have been in a hurry, the alarm went off soon enough, he even left a piece of a pair of that fancy leather gloves there. You know which's in the window.”*

“You were in Searock.” stated Jaune. “You the one who stole that glove.” Then another memory surfaced, another case of theft a few days later.

*“Someone stole women's clothes while they were hanging outside a few days ago..... If we are lucky the opportunist thief has moved on already”*

“And you stole more from that village at Ember Mountain.” He realised she had been only days ahead of him the entire time.

Cinder gave a small smile. “Small world, I guess. But answering your accusations, yes, I was at those places and might have acquired a few things for myself in a less legitimate way.”

Her casual honesty was a welcome change in his opinion. Then again, why would she bother lying about these things? Petty thieving wasn’t the worst thing that she had ever done.

“If we’re having this nice little chat, I’m curious about something myself since you mentioned it.” she said, “You said that you want the Relic of Choice. Out of curiosity, what are intending to do with it once you have it?”

“I just want to take it away from its hiding place, out of Beacon and nowhere near Vale.” he answered.

“And...?” she inquired further.

“And getting it away from people as far as possible.

“That’s it? You’re just going to walk around Remnant with the Relic in your bag and hope for the best?”

“I plan to hide it somewhere safe, most importantly away from population centres.” he replied reluctantly but firmly. “If such a place doesn’t exist then I have to resort to what you

mentioned. The point is I must keep the Relic away from Salem, and it's quite obvious that simply protecting the vaults is ineffective. She already has the Relics of Creation and Knowledge; her getting Destruction is only a matter of time. While she is busy in Vacuo, I can snatch the crown without much of a problem."

"Doesn't sound like a very well-thought-out plan," she commented.

"No, it doesn't, I admit that. But this is the best I have. I don't want Vale to become the next Atlas; Vacuo is out of my control with the missing Summer Maiden, so the sword remains at Shade. But once Salem realises that the crown is not at Beacon, she'll have no reason to attack Vale."

"She'll hunt you instead," she added. "You know that the Relics attract Grimms, right? If you won't find a safe place for the crown, then you'll never be able to stop running from her." She almost sounded like she cared about him.

"I know, but it doesn't matter. Stopping what is coming matters more."

Cinder studied him for a long moment, her expression unreadable. "And you're the one who saves us all."

"... In a way, yes."

Cinder let a sharp laugh escape, a smile creeping across her face. "And I thought Watts was full of himself."

Jaune didn't appreciate the parallel. He knew his previous admission might have sounded egotistical or even narcissistic, but what else should he have said? If his plan pans out the way he hoped, then he would save people's lives! Everyone's!

The main difference between him and the failed Atlasian scientist was that Watts would have never worked for the others' interests but his own. Jaune pegged the man as someone who would never make a sacrifice, take a step back, or help someone unless it served his ego.

Jaune on the other hand was ready to make sure that there would be a future for everyone, even if he wouldn't be there to see it. This was what the Rusted Knight would do, right?

No, he wasn't 'full of himself' as Cinder implied. He was just seeing where this path was heading.

"Both of us know that she will destroy everything and everyone who stands in her way. I don't know what she told you what will happen when she gets all the four Relics, but I guarantee you that whoever remains after this conflict, they'll die. I intend to prevent it in the only way I can. If you're judging me because I see my role in all of this then so be it. Your opinion hardly matters to me," he said

For many minutes, silence ruled among them. The only sound was the rustling trees in the wind.

"You've changed," she said finally.

“What do you mean?” he asked, glancing in her way.

“You’re not the same wide-eyed, naïve boy who thought he could stumble his way into being a hero.” Cinder said, her tone surprisingly even. “You’ve hardened. You’ve got a bit of steel in you now. It’s... interesting.”

“Interesting?” he repeated.

She shrugged, turning her gaze back to the path ahead. “I’m just wondering what changed in so little time. I’ve expected you to be furious the next we see each other, screaming at me, trying to kill me, but you’ve never done that. Instead, here we are, talking, doing jobs together. Strange, isn’t it?”

She was right in that regard. He too had imagined how what could happen when the next time their paths crossed. The past week's events were not among them. Saving her, lying about her, work together were the polar opposite of what should’ve happened.

Her amber eye flicked toward him again, searching. “But the most interesting for me is that where is your hate? Where’s that hate from Mistral? From Atlas?” She tilted her head slightly, her voice quieter. “I threatened your sister, yet when you look at me, even now, or earlier, I don’t see that hate. What happened to you in the past half a year that changed you this much?”

Jaune didn’t respond. His gaze fixed on the path ahead, his jaw tightening as he carefully considered her words. What could he even say to that? The truth was too complex, too personal.

*Too painful.*

Cinder didn’t press him further. She walked alongside him, her posture as relaxed as if they were on a leisurely stroll, though her sharp gaze betrayed her curiosity.

Jaune could feel her waiting for him to speak.

“We are close.” he said finally, distracting her. The road ahead started to tilt upward. The hill loomed before them, there was a strange foreboding that took a hold on him. After the tale of this place, a certain level of eeriness was in the air.

The trees got smaller as they went up, but somehow, they felt older than the tall trees around the forest. The trail narrowed to little more than a rugged, winding path, the ground uneven and riddled with gnarled roots. The closer they got to the top, the more Jaune’s unease grew.

Jaune paused at the edge of the plateau, catching his breath. He then looked around at the area.

The hilltop was surprisingly large, like it wasn’t the actual top because it was cut off a long time ago. Sparse vegetation scattered across the uneven ground, the air smelled faintly of ash and something faintly metallic, like... *blood*.

Jaune shuddered ever so slightly. Old memories threatened to resurface.

Bad memories.

This and the coming storm started to take a toll on him. He had to remind himself that he was not *there* anymore.

He had gotten out.

He was *out*.

After he took a calming breath, he took notice of something interesting. Four big tree trunks, or what remained of them. They were arranged in a rough half-circle, their stump's blackened roots clawing at the ground like skeletal fingers. Jaune recognised them.

"These must have given the inspiration." he muttered as he stepped closer to inspect one. Cinder followed him closely. Silence stretched between them, broken only by the crunch of their boots on the uneven trail and the occasional rustling of leaves in the wind.

Jaune knelt beside the inner-left one, neither were taller than his knee. He leaned closer. "It's charred." He dragged his index finger along the edge of the log, feeling the soot build up under his finger as he did so.

"Ow!" he yelped, jerking his hand back. Jaune looked down at his finger, on its black surface a tiny red globe began to grow.

Cinder, watching with a faint smirk. "Now red ichor soaks the trees once again. I brought you the blood, witch. Show me the terror." she teased with a mockingly ominous tone.

"Not funny, Cinder." he said, annoyed.

"I think it is." she replied with a grin, "What? Don't tell me you believe the story."

"I don't. But I'm not feeling comfortable joking with this." This was like when his sisters and their had played with a Ouija board during a sleepover when he'd been eleven years old. In that year he had seen a couple of horror films with those boards in them, and they might have seeded a deep uneasiness in him about Ouija boards. Since then, he had spent every night outside their house when his sisters used one.

Was it a silly thing? Maybe.

Was it an overreaction? No.

Those boards gave him the chills every time, and refusing to spend those nights in a house where it had been used seemed a sensible decision. It still did.

"Well, it certainly looks the part." she said. "Creepy, desolate, and thoroughly unpleasant. Congratulations, Arc. Your hunch dragged us straight into the second act of a badly written ghost story."

Jaune ignored her sarcasm, his gaze drifting beyond the trees. In the distance, the radio tower rose against the horizon, its silhouette dark against even the darkened, clouded sky. The tower

itself appeared intact, though the faint hum of static from its base suggested it was still operational, and his scroll's signal was still strong.

At its base stood a simple, one-story tall concrete building without windows. A tall, barbed wire steel fence surrounded both the tower and the building. Nothing looked out of place.

"It looks completed. No construction crew nor any equipment." observed Jaune, looking around and stood up. "Let's take a closer look."

They walked to the fence which was at least twice as tall as him, it looked sturdy enough to survive a Boarbatusk's charge at full speed with its unusually thick steel net. The barbed wire on the top looked twice as dense as he had seen anywhere else. Anyone who wanted to get through on it, then that person would be shredded to pieces before they would hit the ground on the other side.

The building was just as new as everything else. It was a big block of solid concrete without any curved line or the littlest décor. It was absolute utilitarian. It felt like a bunker of sorts. Around it, the grass was still spotty; it hadn't yet grown back; otherwise, there was nothing noteworthy between the windowless building and the fence.

"Everything seems fine." Cinder said, turning to him with a faint smile. She placed a hand on her hip. "You owe me your part. Can we go now?"

Yes, it appeared everything was in order. But that tiny voice still told him something was amiss. "Not yet." he said with a serious tone, still studying the area, "I wish to see the entrance. I think it's on the other side." he replied, already walking alongside the fence.

Cinder let out a noticeable sigh then muttered something and followed him after a few steps.

While they circled the fence, Jaune's attention didn't waver from the station building. He found it strange that it didn't have windows; it was unsettling. Why left it out? He thought maybe because of the electronics inside that the network ran through, to protect them against trespassers or Grimm.

"What exactly are we expecting to find at the entrance? Doesn't look like anyone's here." said Cinder, breaking the silence.

"Then how you explain what Mr. Zong heard?" he objected, still looking inside the perimeter.

"Mushrooms, wild berries, herbal teas." she listed, "Take your pick. He's definitely the kind of person who loves experimenting with this stuff. Or, as you could see, he's clearly not all there. Hearing and seeing things might be a daily occurrence for him."

*'He's clearly not... all there.'*

This was what Weiss had said about him, too. His friends had thought he was crazy and had been more willing to believe a talking paper mache figure than him. He would be lying if he said it hadn't hurt. He knew he hadn't been doing well at the time, but it had hurt him

nonetheless. And now, here was another person who, in a way, reminded Jaune of himself a little.

Maybe this was the real reason he wanted to see this through.

“We’re here already. Five more minutes won’t matter that much. If you want to head back so badly, maybe you could help by looking for anything unusual. The sooner we finish, the sooner we leave.”

Cinder rolled her eyes. “Whatever”

After a few more minutes of walking around the fence, Jaune’s steps slowed as he saw it.

“I think I’ll keep my cut.” he said with a grim expression as he came to a stop.

A section of the fence had been bent inward; the metal torn apart as though something massive had forced its way through. A muddy trail led from the breach to the building’s entrance – or what was left of it. The heavy steel door that was designed to secure the structure, lay twisted and broken on the ground beside the frame. Its edges were bent, the metal warped as if it had been ripped off its hinges by sheer brute force.

Whatever had caused this, it had gotten inside last night.

## Chapter End Notes

Well, it looks like more than a five-minute adventure, Jaune.  
Happy New Year everyone!

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

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

Jaune automatically walked to the entrance, his left hand gripping his sword's hilt instinctively. The tracks in the mud were messy, taking out any solid thing was challenging for him, some were deeper than others or unrecognizable. There were a very few boots prints but they were overlapped.

He turned his attention to the entrance and what lay beyond. The mud continued into the building, the corridor that led inside was dark, and only the outside light illuminated it in the first few meters with dim, grey light.

Ominous, if he had to describe it.

He unclipped Crocea Mors from his belt and put it on his arm, still in its sheath form.

Cinder stepped next to him. "And we're about to reach the midpoint."

Jaune still stared into the inky dark. "Didn't you say that you don't believe in tales?"

"You're talking with the Fall Maiden."

*And you with the Rusted Knight*, he thought.

"Just because I don't believe the whole thing, it doesn't mean it doesn't have some truth in it. And I still don't consider it any part of it real besides those trees. I'd be a bit more wary if there was any fire damage, that seemed to be an important part of the story, but I've seen none so far. The Grimm is the most likely perpetrator here."

She was probably right. He was tense over nothing. It was just the weather and Zong's outburst that threw Jaune off. *Pull yourself together! You're a Huntsman, act like one!* He scolded himself mentally.

"Shall we?" said Cinder after she summoned her sword off from her arm. Jaune nodded and they entered.

The mud softly crumbled under their shoes at every step. The amount of mud inside was abnormal, almost like the place had been flooded. "The mud is dry," he observed. Cinder hummed in agreement.

As they ventured deeper, the darkness thickened, swallowing them whole. Jaune slowed his pace, his heartbeat steady but heavy. The air was stale, carrying the distinct scent of damp concrete and dried earth. He strained his eyes, trying to make out anything in the black void ahead.

Then, before he could warn Cinder of his change of speed, she bumped into his back with a soft huff of irritation.

After some grumbling from her, a sudden burst of light flared beside him, momentarily blinding him. He blinked rapidly, his vision adjusting to the flickering glow of fire dancing in Cinder's palm. The warm light casted shadows of her fingers along the corridor walls.

Cinder shot him a stink eye before stepping past him. "If you're going to stop before me, at least warn me first." she muttered, walking past him without waiting for a response. She strode ahead with the confidence of someone who wasn't the least bit concerned about what could await them in the dark.

Jaune exhaled. "Yeah... thanks for the light."

Cinder merely hummed in response, her fire illuminating the path as they ventured deeper inside.

It was strange how muddy the corridor still was this far from the entrance. There must have been more than one intruder here last night to carry in this much filth. There were no markings on the pristine, bare concrete walls – no claw gashes, bullet marks, no sign of battle. Nothing at all. Just sterile, lifeless grey stretching endlessly ahead. The only disturbance was the dirt on the ground, leading deeper into the station.

"There's no blood. Nor sign of a fight." observed Cinder after a few minutes of walking. Her voice, though quiet, echoed faintly in the still air. The space around them felt almost suffocating in its silence. "Which is strange. If no one were here, why would Grimm attack? Without negative emotions to draw them in, this place doesn't stand out from the forest for the Grimm. And if someone *was* here... where's the struggle? Where's the blood? The bodies?"

Jaune took another step, his boots sinking slightly into the dried earth, he scanned the walls again, his frown deepening. "Maybe the fight happened further inside." he suggested. "Or maybe it was more than a mere Grimm attack."

"If you dare say it was that witch's doing, I'm going to hit you." she warned him.

"No. I don't believe the story either and wasn't going to say that."

"Then what did this?" she asked, glancing at him from the corner of her eye.

"When I travelled through the grasslands in southern Vale, the locals mentioned strange Grimm attacks up north. Roslin said something similar was happening in this area, if you remember."

Cinder raised an eyebrow. "You mean that Malex thing?"

"Mamalux." he corrected. "Yeah, that."

"Stupid name. Didn't she also say that was just a folk tale stuff? Because this isn't exactly helping your case."

Jaune rolled his eyes. “What I am saying there could be a connection, fairy tale creature or not. At first, I thought the stories had some truth to them. It wouldn’t be the first time a legend turned out to be closer to reality than we had thought. But when I found you in the forest, I started thinking that it was maybe a new kind of Grimm made by Salem. And until you woke up in the hospital, I thought you had something to do with it.”

Cinder paused, then glanced at him over her shoulder. “That’s why you asked if I led those strikes.”

Jaune nodded. “Both times these things were mentioned, people spotted them during Grimm attacks. Always from the distance. It could be some commander Grimm that is capable of fulfilling complex things that are beyond a usual Grimm’s capabilities. Like destroying specific infrastructures.” theorized Jaune.

Cinder furrowed her brows. “Only her Hounds are intelligent enough to follow more than basic commands, but they cannot control other Grimms. Before I left, she had nothing like what you described. She usually entrusted us to do these kinds of tasks and use the Grimms for distraction if it was needed.

“You betrayed her. Maybe she doesn’t have that kind of trust anymore.”

“... maybe.” she replied.

The corridor ended at a junction. Two passageways stretched out to either side, leading to somewhere on the ground level. The third option was a narrow staircase that only led nowhere but down.

Where the mud trail led.

Cinder let out an exaggerated sigh. “Of course, it’s the basement.”

“Is the commentary truly necessary?”

“No. But it keeps me entertained.”

“So, what? You’re keeping yourself amused by imagining this as some cliché ghost story?”  
Jaune turned to her. “Meanwhile, you are talking with me like I’m an idiot for being cautious because who knows what’s going on.”

Cinder smirked, the flickering firelight reflecting in her amused amber eye. “That’s not true. I didn’t call you an idiot today. Yet.”

“But you are implying.”

“I don’t need to imply anything.” she said, her smirk widening. “And what are you fussing about? You have the Fall Maiden at your side.”

The flames in her palm flared, lighting up the room and casting stronger shadows. For a moment, Jaune felt the heat on his face.

“Nothing can stand in my way.” she declared confidently.

*I did*, he almost blurted out aloud. Luckily, he bit his tongue before the words slipped out. His sense of self-preservation intervened just in time – he had no doubt that saying it aloud would’ve only sparked another argument, one they didn’t have time for. Right now, the last thing they needed was bickering.

The building above ground didn’t seem too big, but apparently the station had a sublevel or levels, and Jaune had no idea how big the whole complex truly was. For a moment, he imagined multiple underground levels filled with Grimm, waiting for them.

A shiver ran down his body.

He reasoned himself that no one would build that many levels for a simple communication station out here. One, maximum two underground levels for the electronics and maybe a panic room for the station’s crew – if it had any.

“Shouldn’t they come up by now? The Grimms. They would have noticed us if they’re still here, right?” Jaune asked Cinder.

Grimm’s visual and auditory abilities were no better than those of animals – often worse – but their capability to sense negative emotions made up for this shortcoming. If an aggressive Grimm had detected anyone’s emotions this close, they would have attacked immediately. They wouldn’t have waited this long. And Jaune highly doubted that a mere pack of Apathy had been responsible for tearing out the entrance door, which had looked almost a ton.

“Yeah, they should have.” Cinder muttered thoughtfully, glancing at the stairs. “They must have left. Otherwise, we’d be in a fight right now.”

Without further discussion, they moved toward the staircase. Cinder went ahead, and Jaune followed closely behind – partly because the stairs were too narrow to walk side by side, but also because he wanted to be ready. He kept his hand near *Crocea Mors*, ready to use it at the first sign of danger, especially if something targeted Cinder. He wasn’t sure how fast she would react in this situation, but in his mind, her survival took priority over his own safety. He hadn’t forgotten her threats from yesterday or that morning.

The staircase only led down to one level, which had the same layout as the upper level. Here, the dirt trail had started to fade, and the temperature dropped by a few degrees. Staying close to Cinder’s fire was more comfortable than Jaune wished to admit.

This floor was just as lifeless as the one above.

“Do you think anyone’s still alive down here?” Jaune asked.

“I doubt it.”

“Why? There could be a panic room of some kind here for situations like this. The station was attacked yesterday, it hasn’t been that long.”

Cinder's gaze remained ahead, her voice steady. "As far as I'm aware, Vale's regulations require government structures outside city areas to have emergency power generators controlled from a designated safe room in case of Grimm or bandit attacks." Cinder explained. "That room also has to be equipped with short-range communication devices and access to security systems. I've seen a few speakers and cameras in the corridors. If anyone were still alive, they would have contacted us by now. You saw those boot prints at the entrance. Someone tried to run away from the attack rather than hide."

"The village isn't far from here. Maybe someone made it away."

"Not if the Grimm were faster." added Cinder darkly. "And someone would have told us about a survivor if there had been one before we left and not sent us to an old man."

Their footsteps echoed in the empty hallway that felt more oppressive. Maybe because he knew they were below the ground.

Then, a sound.

Faint. Crackling.

"You hear that?" he whispered.

Cinder stilled, her gaze sharpening as she listened. The noise was faint at first, barely noticeable, but it was there – an irregular, distorted hiss, like a radio on an empty frequency. Then suddenly, it was cut off.

"It came from somewhere nearby." she murmured.

They exchanged a glance before searching for the sound's source. A few steps later and a right turn, they found an open door from where flickering white light came out.

Cinder extinguished her fire, and they stopped.

"Hello? Somebody there?" said Jaune loudly.

No reply came from the room, only the faint flickering sound of the faulty fluorescent lamp.

They slowly moved closer. Peering in, they saw a ruined room. Destroyed workstations, chairs, and smashed monitors littered the room that had once been placed in two rows. Beyond the tables, the walls were lined with servers – or with something that reminded Jaune of servers – cables hung tangled, or panels wrecked on them. Even the lights on the ceiling were damaged, and a few were dangling on their cords.

"This must have been the control room." Jaune walked in, avoiding a hanging lamp. "Grimm certainly did a number on this place."

"No." Cinder followed him inside, scanning the room with a troubled gaze. "It's more than senseless destruction. It was deliberate."

Jaune frowned. "What do you mean?"

Cinder turned, gesturing at the wreckage. “Didn’t notice something?”

Jaune glanced around again. The damage was extensive, sure, but destruction wasn’t unusual when Grimm attacked settlements. They tore through whatever was in their way, leaving ruins behind. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

“This wasn’t Grimm.”

Jaune looked at her, confused. “What?”

“Look around, Arc. Everything is destroyed, thoroughly, everything. Some would say mindlessly, something that you would expect from Grimms.” she explained. “But this is not the way Grimm would do it. What do you notice?”

Jaune took another sweeping look at the room, scanning over the damage with a more critical eye. And then, he saw it.

Or rather, he didn’t.

“No claw marks.” he muttered.

Cinder nodded. “Exactly.”

Grimm didn’t destroy things like this. They tore, they ripped, they shredded. Claw marks, deep gouges, and erratic slashes would be everywhere. But here, every console, every workstation had been methodically damaged. Screens shattered, wires yanked from ports, circuitry ripped apart.

“Furthermore, why would Grimms bother to destroy a room full of machines? It doesn’t add up”

“If this wasn’t Grimm, then what-”

The crackling static sound returned.

They turned sharply toward the farthest station from the door. The monitor looked intact, but the screen remained black.

“It seems they missed something.” Cinder swiftly walked over to it. She looked down at the broken keyboard and pushed some buttons a few times, hoping for something, but nothing happened. “I think it’s in power saving mode, it won’t show anything until it doesn’t register some input. Help me find a working keyboard, I’ll get a mouse.”

Jaune quickly looked around on the floor and under an overturned chair, he found a keyboard that looked in working condition, only three buttons were missing from it.

He set it down as Cinder plugged in a mouse, then she pushed a button experimentally, and the screen flickered to life.

**ENTER PASSWORD**

“Figures,” Jaune muttered. “Any chance you know the code?” he asked dryly.

Cinder scoffed. “No, but let’s see if we can bypass it.”

Jaune raised an eyebrow. “How?”

Cinder’s sharp gaze flicked to the server racks against the wall. “Push the table to the server on the right.” she instructed. “It looks like the least damaged.”

“Okay... but why?”

She sighed, irritation creeping into her voice. “These computers are likely just user terminals. The real data – the real control – is in those servers. In my experience, these types of systems prioritize network security over physical security. The workstations have stricter access controls, but if we can establish a direct connection to the servers, we might be able to bypass the password entirely.”

Jaune exhaled, nodding. “Alright, let’s give it a shot.” He walked to the end of the table and started to push the whole thing to the server.

Cinder in the meanwhile, was examining the unit. She tried to open up a side panel, but it wouldn’t budge. With an irritated look, she placed her palm against the metal. A low heat shimmered in the air as a glowing orange hue spread beneath her fingertips. A moment later, the panel fractured into dozens of tiny, obsidian-like shards, scattering onto the floor with a soft clatter.

Inside, a neatly arranged mass of cables and circuit boards awaited her. Without much hesitation, she began pulling wires and switching connections.

Jaune watched warily. “Do you even know what you’re doing?”

She looked over her shoulder for a second. “Somewhat.”

“Somewhat?”

“I’ve bypassed security systems before.” she replied. “Not exactly like this, but if you do it enough times, you start recognizing patterns. Though...” She examined a particularly tangled bundle of wires. “This is a bit different from an electronic lock.”

“Great. So you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“You’re welcome to try, but I doubt you’d even recognize the grounding wire.” she shot back. “Or am I mistaken?”

Jaune stayed silent.

“Thought so.” she said and continued her work.

A few minutes passed before she finally pulled back, dusting off her hand in her jeans and plugged in a cable to the back of the terminal. “That should do it.” She grabbed a chair and

sat down at the computer.

Jaune stepped closer as she pressed a key.

The system had let them in.

“Alright, we’re in.” declared Cinder with a little satisfied smile. “Let’s see what we have here.”

Cinder wasted no time. Her fingers danced across the keyboard, tapping out rapid sequences of keys and commands.

Jaune stood behind her, watching the screen flash through menus, lines of text appearing and disappearing in quick succession. None of it made sense to him. He wasn’t *useless* with computers – he knew the basics – but this? This was beyond his capabilities.

“Where did you learn all this?” he wondered.

Cinder didn’t answer immediately. She continued typing, her golden eye flicking between different code lines. “Watts, mostly. He was tasked with teaching me the basics. Neither of us was thrilled about it, but saying no to Salem wasn’t an option. He was a terrible teacher.”

Jaune remembered the Atlasian scientist. “Yeah, he didn’t strike me as someone who liked to work with others.”

Cinder hummed in agreement.

“What are you looking for?”

“I’m trying to find some kind of database, or something that might explain why the station was attacked, but there’s nothing here. No archived data, no reports. Just temporary storage for the communication systems.”

Jaune frowned as he paced around the room. “Then what was this for? Whoever broke in, this room was their target. Someone who was strong enough to bend a steel door, yet they left the most important things here in still workable condition.”

“Workable condition not entirely accurate.” corrected Cinder. “At the moment, the station isn’t transmitting to other stations besides situation status.”

Jaune’s brow furrowed. “But I had signal on my scroll when we were in the forest.”

“That just means your scroll is connected to a local receiving station.” Cinder replied. “It doesn’t mean you’re connected to the network itself.”

“So if I send a message now, it’ll just disappear?”

“Obviously not.” Cinder gave him a look. “For example, the CCT towers had buffer storage in case the network goes down or a tower undergoes maintenance. Messages are stored there

until the system comes back online, after which they are delivered. That's what the temporary storage here is for."

"So there are messages that are waiting to be sent..." He looked back at the computer. "Is there a way to see what's in the buffer?"

She turned back to the screen. "Give me a minute."

Less than a minute later, Cinder stopped typing and leaned a bit closer to read the texts. A look of disappointment sat on her face.

"Nothing important." she muttered.

Jaune walked closer to get a better look. "What's in there?"

Cinder sighed and tapped a few keys.

"There are only three unsent files stored. The latest was from someone in a settlement called Pine Hollow. A purchase confirmation for farming equipment. Before this, a rant about a delayed shipment of dust from a shopkeeper in Greenburrow. And this one..." She tilted her head. "A birthday invitation. Someone's turning five."

"So just... regular people talking about regular things."

"Yes." confirmed Cinder, sounding unimpressed. She leaned back in the chair. "Nothing that explains why the station was attacked. No distress calls, no warnings, not even an unusual report."

Jaune frowned. "Then whatever happened here... it wasn't because of anything in these messages."

Cinder tapped her nails against the desk. "Which means whoever did this wasn't after information. They wanted something else."

Jaune once again started walking around, trying to click together the pieces of the puzzle. But the more he tried, the more he realized that many pieces were missing.

He needed a different approach. Why was the building still standing?

"How much do you know about the kingdom's regulations for government facilities outside city limits?" he asked.

Cinder didn't look up from the screen as she replied. "Enough."

"And about the CCT towers?"

That made her glance at him briefly, and after a brief pause, she replied. "Considering what I did to the one in Vale? More than enough."

Jaune didn't rise to the obvious bait. "Let's assume that Vale used policies from both to establish guidelines for this new communication system to save time. What happens when a facility like this goes completely dark?"

"That depends on the station's importance. If it's critical to Vale's infrastructure, and all contact is lost, they would send a repair crew and supplies with Huntsman support as soon as possible."

Jaune nodded slowly. "But you said the station *is* still transmitting something."

Cinder gestured to the screen. "Yes, but only a status update. The system is reporting that the station is still operational – even if it's not actually functioning at a hundred percent."

"So from Vale's perspective, the station isn't completely down."

"No, it isn't." she confirmed. "As long as that signal remains, standard procedure would be to give the crew time to fix any issues themselves. One, maybe two days at most. If they fail to make contact by then, Vale will send a response team, similarly to in the first scenario."

She turned to Jaune. "Why are you asking?" quired Cinder.

"I think the attackers intentionally left it on to buy time. They could've burned down this place or turned off the power entirely, but they didn't. Instead, they made sure to cause just enough damage to stop the communication and not alert Vale immediately." he explained.

"Buy time for what? There's nothing worthwhile around here. The closest thing that comes to my mind is the railway that circles the Tyrannus Mountains from the south. But even that is questionable because the mudslide cut off the Passage."

Cinder was right. Last night, he had studied the map long enough to remember the area, only a handful of settlements dotted these forests with a few big enough to call it town. The railway she mentioned ran along the foot of the mountain, but reaching it from here would take nearly a week on foot. It was an important route for trade between east and west Vale, yes, but ultimately unreliable because of the storms at the Western Passage.

Then an idea struck him.

"Can you check what was accessed last before we arrived?" Jaune asked.

"I can." She turned back the screen and started typing, then stopped. Moments later, her expression changed into an almost angry one.

Jaune raised an eyebrow. "Problem?"

Her jaw tightened.

She continued looking down at the keyboard where Jaune could see while she was holding down two buttons with her thumb and index finger, she was trying to reach a third one with her little finger unsuccessfully.

“Could you help?” she asked stiffly.

“With what?”

“I cannot reach the Enter.” she replied curtly. Probably feeling uncomfortable asking for help.

Jaune didn't say anything. He simply stepped next to her and pressed the Enter key.

The screen flickered, refreshing the lines. Jaune's eyes darted to the last one.

### **98.11. SECURED CHANNEL**

Without a word, Cinder clicked on it and opened it, but it was nothing but static.

Then someone's voice crackled through the speakers.

“...confirmed... hill... night...” The man's words were faint and grainy, barely intelligible.

“...attack... find... survivors... settleme-...” The transmission fractured again, cutting in and out.

“...horde... silence... attack them...”

The audio cut off. The room fell still.

“Attack?” whispered Jaune.

Cinder's eye widened in realisation. “The village!”

*Shit*

“Thana's still there!” Cinder didn't even wait for Jaune's response. Her chair scraped violently against the floor as she shot up and ran.

Jaune followed her.

They raced through the corridor, then up the stairs, their boots slamming against the concrete steps as they emerged from the basement into the desolate ground floor of the station. But they didn't stop until they reached the entrance.

The sky was darker than it had been when they had entered the station. It was almost black. The Sun had gone down? The storm had grown more violent as well. The air felt sharper on his face when the wind hit him, like dozens of tiny needles launched at him by the howling wind.

Cinder stopped not far from the building, on a small cliff, he joined her. From this vantage point, they could see the village with its faint nightly lights and the forest which surrounded it.

But something caught Jaune's gaze that made him almost forget about the arrival of the raging storm; he gasped.

Not far from the village, the forest was moving, but it wasn't the wind's doing. The trees were moving in a different direction in a clear line than the wind blew the rest, and as he looked further up in that line, many trees were collapsing with faint cracks of snapping trunks.

Jaune felt his blood turn ice cold.

This was a horde.

A Grimm horde was about to attack the village.

*Gods. Fuck.*

How the hell did a horde show up?! How were they going to fight one? It was the airships' job to destroy them.

"We have to go!" declared Cinder, realising what was about to descend on the little settlement. She was ready to jump off the cliff to the hillside, but Jaune caught her arm just in time.

"Wait! That's a horde, Cinder. We can't fight them blindly. We need a plan."

She freed her hand from his hold. Her face twisted in barely concealed panic. "There's no time for that!"

"Damn it, Cinder. We can't just run in." he tried to reason with her. "We won't make it in time before them."

"We won't run."

"Then how do we get there?"

She looked into his eyes. "Strip!"

He blinked. "...What?"

"Your armor. Take it off!"

"Why?" he asked. She looked like she wouldn't accept a no for an answer.

"Because it makes you too heavy for me to carry you."

Took longer than I wished, but it's ready.

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