

Heartburn

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Cinder Fall didn't use to believe in destiny. That is, not until she found him. To Jaune Arc, it was just a simple act of kindness, one he would quickly forget about. It meant nothing to him. To Cinder, it was the most important thing to ever happen to her. He became her destiny, and now that she was finally free, she would be damned if she couldn't have him.

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Prologue

Prologue

" You. Are. Worthless."

The Madam practically spit the words out at her. It was far from the first time Cinder had heard that. It had become a somewhat common occurrence. The Madam liked to remind her when she makes mistakes. She made a lot of mistakes.

" Well? What do you have to say for yourself?"

An open palm came down on Cinder, another rather common occurrence at the Glass Unicorn. It had become part of the routine. Cinder would wake up, she would scrub the floors, she would do whatever the Madame told her to. The Madame would find something, anything, that she had messed up. And she would hurt her. And her "sisters" would laugh at her, make her life even harder than it already was.

And so the cycle continued, day after day.

" Don't just stare at the floor, you little rat. Stand up and look at me!"

It took all her strength to push her body weight off the floor and stand up.

" Well!?! Don't just look at me like some lunatic! What do you have to say for yourself?"

" I- I'm-"

A loud crack echoed throughout the hotel as Cinder was struck square in the nose. Warm blood began to gush out, spilling all over the floor of the lobby.

" Don't you realize we have a reputation here? I can't believe I ever took you in. You clearly don't deserve our kindness. You're a pathetic, good-for-nothing little girl. Scrub this blood off my floor and go back to your room to think about what you've done."

The Madam stormed out of the lobby. Cinder laid in her blood for what felt like hours before she heaved herself off the floor. She could barely manage to stand, but she knew what would happen if she didn't clean up her mess. The Madame had been gentle to her that night, usually she was much rougher.

She used to long for freedom, but it all seemed like a fever dream now. If she could barely survive at the hotel, how could she hope to survive in the outside world? Who's to say anything on the other side was worth it anyway? Nobody cared, not even Rhodes was willing to help her.

She had become hollow, void of purpose.

" Are you okay?"

Cinder turned to her left and saw something that would be forever ingrained into her memory - a pair of perfect blue eyes, staring right at her. Her heart was ignited and started doing backflips in her chest. The agonizing pounding of her head immediately calmed down as she stared right back.

" Are you alright? You're bleeding. You look hurt."

The words were alien to her. Nobody had ever expressed concern for her, never asked her if she was okay. And yet this boy, who had never even met her, was doing just that.

" Do you need help? I can help you if you want it."

The boy was kneeling beside her. His words were so soft. It made her feel something she had never felt before. Cinder found that she liked this new feeling. She wanted more. She wanted him.

A high pitched scream rang out through the hotel as warm blood flowed down Cinder's hand. Not her own, not this time. No. Cinder had finally done it, she had gotten rid of her. She had freed herself.

The bloodied, battered bodies of the Madam and her stepsisters were laid out across the floor of the hotel, and she had never felt better. Not since she had met Jaune. She could leave! She had broken her chains, and there was no holding her back anymore. Nothing could stop her. Especially not the broken corpses of her oppressors.

Cinder walked out the door. It was a liberating feeling. For the first time in her life, there was nobody to grab her, to hold her down, to beat her into a bloody, bruised mess. Nobody to keep her at the hotel, where she had grown up, fearful and alone.

Nobody to keep her away from him.

She looked back at the hotel. From the outside, the hotel may have looked like an extravagant symbol of wealth. To Cinder, it stood as a symbol of oppression, of her old life. Just as she would destroy her old life, one filled with tears and fear, she would destroy the hotel.

Cinder ran back into the hotel and looked around the wooden interior. The very flammable, wooden interior. The very flammable, begging to be destroyed, wooden interior.

Pushing her hands against the wall, Cinder pushed as much heat as she could muster into her palms. The effect was almost immediate. Instantly, a raging fire began to eat at the wall, spreading to the curtains, starting to engulf the floors. The heat was fierce, yet comforting.

Cinder bolted out through the front door for the second time that night. Finding herself a suitable distance from the soon-to-be-ash Glass Unicorn, she turned back and stared, seeing something she would never forget.

It only took all of a couple minutes for the outside of the hotel to catch fire along with the interior. It was a beautiful sight. A torrent of embers climbed along the outside, incinerating the cursed building. Screams ran through the street, music to Cinder's ears.

It was all such an amazing sight. But Cinder couldn't stay long, she had work to do. She had to find him. Cinder turned down the street, and began to sprint in the other direction.

"I simply wish to find him, mistress. I have no intentions of running away or abandoning you. You know I am loyal. Just look at all that I have done for you!"

Cinder's patience was waning. It had been years since she had killed the Madam and left behind the Glass Unicorn, years since she had joined Salem, and yet there was still no sign of him. Her beloved Jaune had left no trail, given almost no information to help search for him. Nothing except a name. Every day her heart ached for him, every night she dreamt about him, and every morning she woke up to the crushing reality that he wasn't truly there with her.

Every little thing she'd ever done was for him. If not for him, she never would have left the Glass Unicorn, at least not until much later. There was no way of finding him if she stayed. The only reason she'd joined Salem was because the Queen had offered her power, and told her that there would be nothing keeping them apart if she took it. And so she accepted, and with it, a lifetime of servitude.

"I do believe we've had this conversation before, Cinder," Salem responded sternly. "You will go to Beacon and take the maiden powers, and only then may you go out to find your Jaune. Do I not make myself clear enough?"

There was nothing unclear about what she was saying to Cinder. The reason she kept pushing back against her on the matter was the fact that she simply refused to wait any longer. Salem had told her time and time again that she just had to do one or two things more,

and then, and only then, would she be allowed to go off to be with Jaune. No longer would she sit there and accept that bullshit.

"You make yourself more than clear, mistress." Salem relaxed ever so slightly on her throne, thinking that the conversation was over with. "But I cannot accept that." Cinder spoke with conviction and authority, as if she was the one in charge of the Queen of the Grimm, and not the other way around.

"You *dare* refuse *my* judgment?! Perhaps I should remind you who is in charge here," Salem screamed angrily.

Cinder stood her ground, knowing that if she didn't, there would be no chance of finding her Jaune. They would never be together. The thought of losing him terrified her.

"You know that I shall never turn away from your orders, mistress. Whatever you say must be done will be done completely and efficiently. I only suggest that you allow me to lend some of my efforts into my own personal ambitions. In fact," Cinder turned to the only other person in the room, Arthur Watts. "Watts has already completed every task that he has been given, why don't you have him find Jaune? If he's good enough to work for you, I'm quite sure he will be able to find the man in a matter of days, even given limited information."

Cinder and Watts glared at each other. Even though they were working towards the same thing, the two of them never got along. To Cinder, Watts was an arrogant, pretentious, stuck-up bastard. The man constantly insulted her love, something that infuriated her to no end. His only saving grace was that he no longer bad-mouthed Jaune himself. He had tried that once, and it hadn't ended well for him.

" *You see through rose-tinted glasses. He was one good person who treated you a little nice when everyone else in your life abused you. That's the only reason you think of him as... 'perfect,' as you put it.*" Watts laughed. "*I'll bet he isn't truly all that great.*"

Only Salem had been able to stop her rampage.

To Watts, Cinder was a silly, lovestruck little girl, who's obsession with a man who she'd barely even spoken to was holding everyone back. She ran off feelings and blocked out all reason when it came to "her Jaune," and if there was any kind of person that Watts truly hated, it was those who refused to listen to reason. Hence why he took so much joy in mocking her.

Salem paused, staring at the both of them angrily, seeming to consider the point. The room was filled with deafening silence.

"Fine. Watts, I am assigning you to find this 'Jaune,'" Salem growled out. Cinder could barely keep herself from leaping up with joy. Watts scowled. "If any other task comes up, *anything* that you are needed for, you are to drop your search until further notice. Am I understood?" The last part was for Cinder as much as it was for Watts.

"Yes, mistress," the two said in unison.

"Watts, stay behind. Cinder, leave us to talk in private."

"Of course, mistress." The girl had to restrain herself from skipping out of the throne room. Salem and Watts watched her shut the door behind her as she exited, leaving them alone together.

"Now, I do have a feeling we are both thinking the same thing. If Cinder gets the chance, she might just run away with the boy and leave us all behind to finish the job on our own. We will need to keep an eye on her." Watts nodded along. "You will find the boy, if only because no attempt to do so will make her unloyal. As Cinder has made us all well aware, his name is Jaune and he visited the Glass Unicorn hotel a few years ago, more than likely with his family. If there was anything else to go off of, she would have shoved it down all our throats long ago. Find him, but make sure you know Cinder's whereabouts at all times. Make it known that she can't run from us."

"It will be done, my Queen," Watts responded, unhappy that he was being told to do what was ultimately Cinder Fall's bidding.

Arthur Watts stalked towards the door, opening it to reveal the subject of their previous conversation, her having waited just outside the room to catch him as he left.

Cinder Fall looked at her acquaintance with a smug smirk. "Seems you have your work cut out for you. If I were you, I would start working by tonight, lest our mistress begin to doubt your ability." She began to walk away, before turning back to him. "Oh, and just to give you any additional information, I would guess him to be in between sixteen and twenty. Should make it a little easier to help me find him. Thank you for the assistance." Cinder walked happily down the hall, ignoring the scowl that Watts gave her in return.

Days had gone by since Salem assigned Watts to help Cinder find her beloved, and she hadn't been happier since she burnt the Glass Unicorn. *Finally*, there was hope! Her fantasies felt more and more likely, more and more *real*! Despite their animosity, she couldn't deny that Arthur Watts wasn't incredibly good at what he did. Surely, he would find her Jaune in no time, and they could be together. Afterall, he knew better than to fail his Queen.

Just because she was hopeful didn't quite mean she was no longer impatient, though, as evidenced by her current visit to her "co-worker." Cinder pounded her fist on the man's door, hearing movement from inside. The door opened, and the glare of Watts greeted her.

"I am busy as of the moment, Cinder. Or did you forget that our mistress has given me an extra assignment? I do not have time to talk pleasantries."

The sheer disrespect with which he addressed her was almost enough to dampen her good mood by itself. Almost.

"Once again I must thank you for the help," she said, a not-so subtle reminder that even if it had been Salem to command it, he was still doing her bidding at the end of the day. "And don't worry, I want to talk pleasantries even less than you do, trust me. The only reason I am here is to check up on your progress. What have you managed to find on him?"

"I'm glad to see you have such faith in my ability," Watts responded with a smirk. "I've managed to find a multitude of people that match your description. I have pictures of said people that I will bring out to you momentarily, if you would just have a little patience."

Screw that. Cinder had had patience for long enough, it was time for *results*.

"That will not be necessary," she said, brushing past the larger man into his office. Although the man called it that, the room was clearly not designed to be one. Long ago it had been a bedchamber, but it was now reorganized with the desks, computers, and storage that Watts needed for his job. "I will go through everything right now."

Watts was clearly angered by what he perceived to be a power-play, but decided it would be best to allow her to do so. At least it would get her out of his hair sooner. And so he sat down and opened a folder full of papers, government records, and most importantly, pictures.

Anticipation was eating away at Cinder. She was more than a little excited, and who could blame her? If Watts had done his job properly, she would be miles closer to finding her beloved!

"Spread them all out on the table and allow me to pick out the correct one," she said eagerly.

The scientist glared at her angrily. "I'm sorry, have you begun to believe that you are in charge of me? I do not answer to you, whether I am working on this silly project or not!"

Rage overcame her. She pointed accusingly at the man with her right hand, fire leaking from the left. " *Silly!?* You believe all this is just some silly little game? That I've done this for kicks? Show me those pictures or I will make you *suffer*. "

Watts stared back at her, unafraid. She couldn't actually do anything to him without punishment from Salem, and on top of that he currently held all the information that she had spent years seeking. Nevertheless, he took up a stack of pictures and writing and began to spread them out across the table.

Cinder zealously looked over the pictures Watts had provided her. He was saying something to her, but she didn't listen, instead putting all her attention into the photos that lay before her. There were only five or six of them, all of which seemed to be government ID photos, as evidenced by the black expressions and lack of any background.

A picture of some boring looking brunette, one of a dark haired boy, and-

Cinder froze. Glowing blonde hair, dazzling blue eyes that seemed to reflect the ocean... there was just no mistaking it. This was him! After so many years of loneliness, she had finally found her beloved Jaune! He was even more gorgeous than when she had first met him! Perfect. That was the only way to describe him. He was the perfect man. No one else could possibly hope to compare to him.

"Tell me everything about him," she said, pointing to her beloved's picture.

"I *did*, but you weren't listening to a word I said." Yet again, the two of them glared at each other, a rather common occurrence at Evernight Castle. "His name is Jaune Arc. He's seventeen years old and enrolled at Beacon Academy as a freshman."

Beacon? That's where she would be! They could finally be reunited after all these years! Would he recognize her, or would she have to jog his memory? She didn't mind reminding him of their meeting,

hell, she would start from scratch if she had to. She would do anything for her Jaune.

"What else?" Cinder needed to know *everything* about him.

"That's all that I have for you," he responded.

"That's it!? You had *days!*" She needed more than that!

"And you had years, and yet you accomplished nothing. You don't need more than this to find him, and I don't need to waste any more of my time on this."

"Can you get me into Beacon early? Before the rest of the exchange students arrive?" Cinder was just too eager to finally find him.

"Not without making you stand out, and I doubt any of us would like that. Wait, and follow through with your original plan. It will only be but a month."

"Fine," she responded, walking out the door without ever taking her eyes off the picture of Jaune that Watts had given her.

"Oh, and Cinder," she heard him say from outside his office, "Remember who you work for."

Cinder looked back up at him, finally peeling her eyes away from the picture of her Jaune. "Of course, Watts. You know how loyal I am." She shut the door behind her.

Cinder fell asleep staring at her new picture, and once again dreamed of her Jaune.

Chapter 2

Cinder scrubbed the floor, following her nightly routine, although her mind was not on cleaning. Rather, it was on the blonde boy who had spoken to her the day before, Jaune. Her heartbeat got faster every time she thought of him. He had been so kind and thoughtful, so considerate. Nobody had ever treated her so well before, not any of the other guests, no one at the orphanage, certainly not the madame or her stepsisters. It was completely alien to her, and she loved it.

It wasn't just that she was in love with how he had spoken to her, or how he had been so considerate, although those both were certainly part of it. She loved him. They hadn't had more than a single conversation, but it was undeniable.

Looking across the floor, she didn't see a single mark. It was stainless, meaning her job was done and it was time to return to the madame for her next task. She stood up, ready to do so, but something else caught her eye. Through the window, she saw the very boy her thoughts were revolving around surrounded by a number of other blondes, all of which looked like him to some extent. Cinder decided that they were probably his family.

She stopped and stared at the group through the window, having completely forgotten about her work. Including Jaune, there seemed to be about ten of them, eight of them being female. They needed two cars to transport all of them.

Cinder watched as they began loading bags into the trunks, opened the doors and got in. They weren't leaving, were they? Why would they leave so soon, they hadn't stayed more than two days! They couldn't be going already, she still needed to talk to him and tell him how she felt!

Panic settled in as she heard the car engines starting. Desperate to stop them, she ran out the front door of the hotel just as the two

vehicles drove away, leaving her alone in the street. Instantly, warm tears began flowing down her face. Cinder was no stranger to pain, but nothing the madame had ever inflicted on her could compare to what she felt in that moment. She dropped to her hands and knees, crushed that Jaune had been separated from her before she could speak to him again.

It wasn't like she hadn't been given the chance to do so. In fact, she'd seen the boy alone multiple times throughout the couple days he spent at the Glass Unicorn, but every time she failed to muster more than a weak smile and awkward wave. Fear had kept her from going further.

Could the world not offer her one bit of happiness? The only thing she had ever truly wanted in her life had just been torn away from her. What had she done to deserve that?

Someone lifted her up by her collar, choking her, but the pain was insignificant compared to the aching in her heart.

"Get up, girl," the madame screamed at her. "What the hell are you doing out in the street!? When did I give you permission to leave the building and go outside!? Will you ever learn to obey me?!"

The woman dragged her by her arm back into the hotel. Once they were back inside, the madame immediately began to punish Cinder. And for what, going outside? Daring to do one thing on her own accord? She didn't deserve this.

"I've given you so much kindness," she said, slapping her repeatedly on the cheek. "And this is how you repay me? I took you in, fed you, took care of you, and for all of that you try to run away? Ha! You can't even do that right!"

Once again, she told Cinder about her "kindness," presenting herself as some sort of savior. A week ago, she might have almost believed her, having known nothing else throughout the entirety of her short

life. But Jaune had shown her what real kindness is, and it sure as hell wasn't this.

No longer would she let fear rule her. No longer would she sit down and let the world abuse her.

Cinder strolled along the outside of Beacon's campus. It was the middle of the night, and the only light came from the inside of buildings. She couldn't be spotted by anyone from the school, student or faculty, so the darkness only made her job easier.

It had only been a couple of weeks since Watts had found her blonde angel. Although she still didn't like the man, he did gain considerable favor in her eyes for it, even if Salem had to order him to do so. Despite the fact that Jaune awaited her at Beacon, Watts had suggested she wait to go until the rest of the exchange students arrived, allowing her, along with Emerald and Mercury, to blend in among them. Screw that. Cinder had done more than enough waiting, it was time to take action.

So here she was, stealthily making her way to Beacon Academy's library, where information on every student at the school was held on record. She needed to confirm beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jaune was truly enrolled there, and if he was, that meant everything from his teammates and schedule to his home address would be neatly presented to her on a piece of paper. Those would all be important details.

Everything was going smoothly. Nobody had stopped her to ask questions, or even seen her for that matter. This was seriously the kind of security the most elite huntsman academy on Remnant had to protect itself? It almost made her want to laugh. She would've done so if not for the fact that it was also what was keeping her Jaune safe. He, and Cinder by extension, were lucky that she was what that security was supposed to prevent from entering. Had someone else come instead, Jaune would be at serious risk. The thought did not sit well with her.

Coming to the front door of the library, she stopped in her tracks. If it was unlocked, she would be able to simply go through the main entrance, but did she really think she'd just be allowed to waltz into the building, unimpeded? Honestly, if the rest of her visit was anything to go off of, it wouldn't be surprising. Still, though, Cinder was a cautious woman. She began to look for other, less obvious, entrances, and spotted a few windows almost directly above her.

The windows lay on a slanted roof a ways above her, but were accessible nonetheless. Cinder quickly scaled a lamppost that stood right next to the building and jumped off, grabbing onto the edge of the roof and pulling herself up to the window. Finding it unlocked, she slid it open and crawled through. Apparently, no one in the school seemed to believe in taking safety precautions. Anger quickly came back to her. What if an unlocked window was all that stood between her Jaune and some psychopath trying to hurt him!?

Cinder looked around at her surroundings. She was on the second floor, a fact made obvious by her being on an indoor balcony and her initial entrance point. If her sources were to be trusted, the room she was looking for was on the same story. Getting up, she quickly spotted a door in the back of the library and walked as quietly as she could in its direction. As she got closer, she noticed a lock on the doorknob.

Surely they would at least think to lock the door protecting sensitive information on the entirety of the student population? Testing it, she saw that they had. Luckily, that wouldn't be a very big issue for her.

Cinder combined her semblance with her half of the maiden powers to push enough heat into the palm to melt the doorknob, removing the lock and allowing the door to swing open. That would certainly raise suspicion, but that wasn't her biggest concern at the moment. Stepping into the room, she saw a number of computers and file cabinets, each labeled by letter and divided by last name. Teeming with excitement and anticipation, she looked for the one labeled 'A' and opened the drawer. Despite the large amount of files, they only went up to 'Al.'

They must keep records from previous students as well. That's fine, they're sure to have something on my beloved Jaune put away here somewhere.

The next one stopped at 'Arberry,' just before 'Arc.' That meant he had to be the very first one in the next drawer. Sure enough, Cinder opened the drawer below it to find the first file labeled 'Jaune Arc.' Immediately, she was overwhelmed with happiness.

That meant he was *here!* At Beacon! Sure, Watts had told her he would be, but now it seemed so *real!* He was closer than he had ever been since they first met. She could see the student dorms from out the window, and just thinking about how he was somewhere in there, just a building away, made her heart pound.

Cinder wasted no time in opening the folder. She did a quick scan of the numerous pages Beacon had helpfully provided her, took them out, and walked back out the door. Just as silently as she had come in, Cinder left the library through the same window and slid down the roof onto the ground below, completely ecstatic at her discovery.

Before leaving, she paused and looked back up towards the dormitories, where her beloved was sure to be sleeping peacefully. The thought of it filled her with a warmth she hadn't felt since they met.

"Don't worry Jaune, we'll be together soon."

Although she was reluctant to leave him, Cinder then disappeared into the night unnoticed.

Cinder couldn't have been more excited as she got off the bullhead that she had taken with Emerald and Mercury. Soon, after all that time away from him, she would finally find Jaune! After so many tears of loneliness, so many restless nights, so much fruitless effort put into searching for him, they would finally have their long-awaited

reunion. Technically, they were there to take the maiden powers, but that was no longer her main priority.

It hadn't been necessary to take the bullhead to Beacon, in fact it would have been easier not to, but they had decided to do so in order to make sure their cover was as believable as possible. A melted doorknob was sure to be noticed at some point, and she would rather not be the subject of whatever questions that would raise. The actual Haven students either just assumed that they'd never seen the three of them because they were in a different year or just didn't question their presence.

The files Cinder had managed to obtain were well worth the trouble. Now having his classes and dorm room number memorized, she knew roughly where to expect him to be at almost any point throughout a school day. Although learning that he was partnered with Pyrrha Nikos made her a lot less happy than everything else did.

That would be a problem for a number of reasons. Partners at huntsman academies usually grew rather close, and it was easy to see why. They took classes together, fought together, risked their life together... all things that had a tendency to help form friendships. For one thing, Pyrrha Nikos was a possible maiden candidate, and if she were to receive the powers, that being a likely scenario, Cinder would have to dispose of her. If she and Jaune were friends at that point, that would mean hurting him by extension, something she simply couldn't bring herself to do.

The other problem with that was them being close in the first place. Although it pained her to admit it, Nikos was a rather beautiful young woman. Not as beautiful as herself, but still good-looking, not to mention a four-time champion of the Minstral Regional Tournament. Cinder was a rather bit paranoid that the girl would attempt to lure Jaune in with her appearance and meaningless titles.

There was also the other girl on team JNPR, Nora Valkyrie. She would have to keep an eye on her, too, but it was mostly Nikos that

she was worried about.

"Follow me to the dorms," she said to Emerald and Mercury. "We must integrate ourselves as quickly as possible."

"Of course, Cinder," Emerald responded. As usual, she would be loyal to her every word. The green-haired girl had a lot of admittedly misplaced devotion in who she saw as her savior. Mercury was a bit more of a liability, but fear would keep him in line if nothing else did. Not like there was anywhere to run anyway.

"Now, our goal here is simple," Cinder said after finding that they were out of earshot. "We are here to take the rest of the maiden powers, and to do that, it is absolutely crucial that we do not out ourselves as suspicious. As long as anybody else is around, we are Haven students." Her two underlings nodded at her words. "That means you both must refrain from hurting anyone without my express permission, which I do not expect to give. For now, our job is purely espionage."

"I understand, Cinder," Emerald said.

"I assume you are familiar with your duties as well, Mercury?"

"Yea, yea, just get information on the students without hurting any of 'em, pretty simple really."

Good. They knew what they had to do. Cinder just hated having to repeat herself.

The three of them soon arrived at the student dormitories. She planned to look for Jaune around his dorm room the moment they dropped their luggage off. Her chest was heavy with excitement. After so long, they would finally be reunited! She had never anticipated anything more in her life. Unfortunately, she wouldn't be able to confess her love right then and there, but by no means would that stop her.

She walked quicker and quicker as her impatience grew, practically jogging down the hallway by the time they arrived at the dorm room. Cinder hastily took her key out and unlocked the door.

"I'm afraid I have some business that must be attended to as soon as possible. You two get settled and I will join you shortly," she said, wanting to look around the building for Jaune right away.

"Mercury and I can come if you'd like," Emerald said. "I'm sure we could be of some assistance, whatever it is you need to do."

"No, that will not be necessary. Both of you stay here while I take care of some personal business." With that, Cinder shut the door on them. There was no time to sit around talking to them, she had better things to do.

Cinder had been wandering around the hallways of Beacon's freshman dorms for multiple hours, careful to stay close to JNPR's room. It wasn't the most effective method of looking for Jaune, but it would work eventually, provided that she kept her patience. Besides, it would be rather strange for her to just stand outside the door and wait for him. The last thing she wanted to do was scare him away with her... obsession, as some may call it.

Yes, she supposed it would be fair to say she had a rather intense obsession with Jaune. Almost everything Cinder had done had been done for him. He was practically all she ever thought about, and the possibility of being with him was her sole motivation. But what was wrong with that? He was so amazing, so perfect.

So far, there was no sign of him, or any of his teammates for that matter. That was fine. There were still a good few hours left in the day, and it wasn't like she had gotten to where she was without determination. It was a little frustrating to be so close and still not find him, though. Actually, it was very frustrating.

Hearing her scroll ring, her eye twitched in annoyance. She looked at the number to see that it was Emerald who was calling her and declined it, deciding that whatever it was the girl wanted could wait. It wasn't another minute before Emerald called her a second time.

This time, Cinder took her scroll out and hung up, barely bothering to read the caller ID. She didn't care if Salem herself was calling, she had more important things to do! A third call came.

Fine! If Emerald is so desperate to have me over there, I'll return to the dorm room! Once I'm done telling her off I'll come back and just hope I didn't miss him.

The girl could be rather irritating at times. She was a good servant and when Cinder told her what to do she would do it, but it was obvious that she desired to have something more than that with her. Her attachment to Cinder was not always something that was fun to deal with, even if it made her easy to manipulate.

Cinder turned the corner and collided with someone else coming down the hallway, making her fall down backwards and land in a sitting position. She opened her mouth to lash out at whoever had bumped into her, but froze when she looked up and saw their face.

"S-sorry! I, ah," Jaune cleared his throat, his face red with embarrassment. "Sorry, I should've been watching where I was going," he said with an awkward smile, extending his hand out to help her up.

It was like she had been struck by lightning. Time seemed to slow down as her senses shut down completely. Her heart was burning inside her chest. It was *him!* Their surroundings seemed to disappear entirely. Her sweet Jaune had at last revealed himself to her!

Oh Oum, he somehow looked even better in person than in the picture she had! His hair was even silkier, his skin creamier, and if he had the face of an angel before, he was a *god* now. They locked

eyes and Cinder's chest felt like it was about to implode. Those deep blue orbs looked *magical*. How could it be possible for anybody to be so *gorgeous* ?

A good five seconds went by before she even registered his outstretched hand. Once she did, she wasted no time in taking it.

"S-sorry again," he said, helping her up off of the floor.

She stood up only for her legs to immediately buckle out from under her, putting her back on her hands and knees. Every part of her body was shaking from the contact. She looked back behind her, seeing him walking in the other direction with his back turned to her. Her body urged to chase after him and refused to move at the same time. She wanted to yell for him, tell him to wait and come back, yet she couldn't make a sound. Sweat trickled down her forehead, but it didn't even register to her.

Cinder thought she had been happy when Watts found him. She thought she had been happy when she found his file in Beacon's library. Next to this, that seemed like nothing. This was so far beyond anything she had ever felt before. Her smile was so wide her jaw threatened to fall off.

She finally forced her body to move, taking her hands off the ground and kneeling on both legs. Slowly, her senses came back to her.

She knew he would be at Beacon, it's not like it was a huge surprise. Even so, seeing him made him feel so much more *attainable* to Cinder! Before, it almost felt like he wasn't real, like he was some figment of her imagination she dreamt up to ease her suffering.

Her better judgment was telling her to stay away for now and talk to him at a different time when she had a real excuse to do so, but she didn't listen, instead opting to sprint down the hall in the direction he had left, desperate to catch up to him.

She ran down the hall looking for him, but eventually arrived at his dorm without finding any trace of him.

Cinder cursed under her breath. She had waited too long to pursue him, and he had disappeared, likely returning to his dorm room. It didn't matter, though. Not even that could dampen her happiness.

I found him! After all this time, we can finally be together!

She stepped up to JNPR's door and leaned her shoulder against it, trying to get as close to her beloved Jaune as physically possible. Her emotional side screamed to break the door down and march in, while a more reasonable part of her said to return to her own dorm and talk to him tomorrow. For the first time in a while, she listened to the latter.

"Oh Jaune, I can't wait until we're finally reunited," she said under her breath, pushing her palm against the door. "Just wait one day more for me, my love."

Cinder turned back and walked back towards her dorm room, still riding the high of their short meeting.

Chapter 3

The school week was yet to start at Beacon, and most students chose to make the most of their final few days of break by going out into Vale or spending time with their friends on campus. There were also those who had left their schoolwork until the last moment, and had to use the time to catch up. Luckily, Cinder had none of that on account of not actually being a student, and as long as Jaune wasn't in the city, she had no interest in being there. And so Cinder stayed at Beacon, where Jaune was.

After hours of trying to get him away from his friends, they finally had some alone time together in the library. Granted, he didn't know she was there with him, but they were together nonetheless.

It was honestly a miracle that he hadn't noticed her following, and it was best that she keep it that way for now.

While she would love an excuse to talk to him, Cinder would also admit that it wouldn't exactly be unreasonable for him to be a little unnerved by her behavior. On top of that, she was still *euphoric* over finally having found him, and she felt she still risked pouring all that emotion out if the boy were to come up and speak to her, after all, just *seeing* him after so long completely destroyed her composure. She couldn't risk scaring him away with all that.

It's not weird for me to want to make sure he's safe, but I need to further our relationship to a point where he'll understand why I'm doing what I'm doing.

It was hard to stop herself from just going up to him, but everything about their reunion had to go *perfectly*. To make that happen, she had to know some things before she actually talked to him, everything he liked and didn't like, what made him happy, and most importantly, what it was he looked for in a woman. That last bit would

be a little harder to figure out, but she was more than determined. She couldn't wait forever, though.

Deciding that she had been looking away from him long enough, Cinder brought her head back up to continue staring at her beloved. He looked *incredible* just sitting alone at his table, but then again, when didn't he? He seemed invested in whatever book he was reading, which meant he was looking down, or more importantly, not up at her. That meant Cinder could admire his features from the table over without him noticing. So long as she didn't gaze at him for too long, that is.

Snap

It also meant he didn't notice her getting her pictures. Cinder smiled down at her scroll, quietly giggling in a way only he could make her.

"Hey, Jaune!"

Looking back up in annoyance, she saw one of his friends approaching his table.

Do they have to spend so much time around him?

He was always with his *damn* friends. It was a constant point of frustration to Cinder. She wasn't frustrated at him, that would be impossible, just at how difficult it was to get him alone. It seemed like getting him away from them would be a rare occurrence.

Of course, it was only natural for someone as great as Jaune to have a lot of friends, but she still didn't like them. For one thing, the vast majority of them were female, and that alone meant Cinder considered them to be dangerous, but even worse was that they were taking up precious time that he should be spending with her. She planned to befriend them to earn favor with Jaune, but that didn't mean their friendship would be real. Luckily, Cinder was quite skilled at faking things.

"Oh, hey Ruby."

The girl was Ruby Rose, who stopped the famous Roman Torchwick from getting away with robbing a dust shop. Although interesting, that detail took a backseat to the fact that she seemed to be rather closely acquainted with Jaune, a little uncomfortably so for Cinder. But fortunately for Ruby, their relationship seemed purely platonic. Still, that didn't mean the girl wouldn't be monitored.

"What are ya reading?"

This was something she couldn't miss. She silently thanked the girl for the opportunity to finally learn some of her beloved's preferences.

"Quiet in the library!"

Cinder looked behind her and glared at the school's librarian. She could see no reason for them to be quiet, it wasn't like there was anyone else in the library. Except Cinder herself, of course, but she wanted to hear this!

Jaune and the Ruby girl started talking again in hushed voices, just barely too quiet for her to make out what they were saying. Cinder let out a sigh of frustration. It seemed like it would be harder than she thought to figure out what she needed to know about him. Only to add to her annoyance, Ruby was now standing beside the table in between her and Jaune, meaning she couldn't even admire him.

Move, you bitch!

It seemed it would be rather difficult to get close to Jaune's companions. It wasn't a question of whether they would see through her facade, rather, it was a question of if she could tolerate them enough to keep it up. Ruby hadn't so much as looked in her direction, yet she was already infuriating her.

They always had to do *something* to mess her up. Whether it was this girl positioning herself perfectly so that she couldn't look at her

Jaune anymore, Nora Valkyrie yelling loud enough to make everyone around her go deaf, or Nikos just generally existing, they always gave her something to be angry about. Well, that was fine. She never cared about them anyway, just Jaune.

Speaking of Jaune, he was now standing up and putting his book back on the shelf. A shame. Cinder couldn't just follow them out, that would be too noticeable. Instead she would just have to watch him leave and catch up with him later, an inconvenience that only served to exasperate her displeasure.

That irritation would almost certainly turn to anger as soon as Jaune was out of her sight. She could never be too angry when her beloved was so close. He just had such a calming effect on her, like his mere presence told her that everything would work out. When he wasn't there, though?

That was another story entirely.

She stared at the back of her Jaune until he was out the library door. Eagerly walking up to the book shelf, she pulled out the one that he had been reading earlier. Cinder looked down on the book with a smile.

Basic Grimm Studies

Her smile turned to a frown when she realized that he had been doing school work. That told her practically nothing about him!

Fine then. I wasn't under the illusion that this would be easy. This just means that I'll have to keep following him. Not that I mind.

Although the smarter thing to do might have been to wait to leave and catch up with him later, Cinder rushed out of the library and quickly looked around for the boy. Seeing him walk down the hallway with Ruby Rose, she began to follow at a distance just close enough to hear them from.

"Come on though, grimm studies? Just swing at it with something sharp until it's dead, no science needed," Jaune said. Gods, Cinder loved hearing his voice.

"Well, I guess it's kinda helpful to know their weak points and stuff. Four-hundred pages does seem a little excessive, though," Ruby responded. Ugh, why couldn't she just be silent and let Jaune talk?

"I dunno, though. That's more Weiss' strong suit. Anyway, me and Team RWBY have some team training scheduled in a couple minutes, so I've gotta go. We'll be making some team attacks that'll blow everyone away," the girl stated with almost mock-confidence. Her remark earned a chuckle from Jaune.

Cinder burned with jealousy. She should be the one making him laugh, not this little girl!

"See you later, Craterface," Jaune said, addressing the younger girl by her nickname. "Oh, and uh, say hi to Weiss for me!"

Cinder's eyes narrowed. What could he possibly want with someone like Weiss Schnee?

"Ah, yea... Yea, I'll do that. See ya, Vomitboy." The moniker made him scratch the back of his head and let out an embarrassed laugh.

Jaune may have not been that upset that he had been called such a thing, but Cinder most certainly was.

How dare she call him something so- so... degrading! That little girl has no right! Does she even have any clue who she's talking to?

Cinder decided she did not very much like Ruby Rose. As the girl walked down the hallway to the left, she stuck her head around the corner and glared daggers into the back of her head. Jaune would never have to face such disrespect when he was with her.

Her beloved began to move through the hallway to the right that led to the student dorms before someone else caught his attention.

How the hell do they keep finding him?! Will they not offer us just a few seconds of peace and quiet together!?

Cinder listened from just around the corner, out of view.

"Oh, hey Pyrrha! Are you ready to start our training? I was just telling Ruby about how much you've been helping me to improve."

"T-thank you, Jaune. Do not sell yourself short, though. I may be teaching you but it's your own hard work that makes the real difference," the red-head responded.

Once again, jealousy surged in Cinder, overwhelming her like a tidal wave. Pyrrha Nikos didn't deserve his praise! And while she was almost certainly correct that she had nothing to do with Jaune's own achievement, her words could very well have been an attempt to get him to develop feelings for her, and her "teaching" just a ploy to spend more time with him.

The possibility that the Nikos *whore* was trying to take Jaune away from her filled Cinder with fiery anger. Her hands were clenched into fists. She wanted to turn the corner and *cremate* the so-called champion.

Unfortunately, though, her hands were tied. If she were to do so, not only would Beacon take notice of a missing student and launch an investigation, but Jaune would be devastated. Just as she thought they would be, the two were seemingly very close.

Thinking the situation over only made her even more infuriated.

Cinder took a few deep breaths, calming herself down before she could do something she'd regret. She couldn't let her emotions get the best of her. If Jaune saw her as some irate lunatic, her chances with him would be all but thrown out the window.

Trying to get a glance at the two, she poked her head around the corner to see Jaune facing away from her and towards his partner. She stopped and stared for a few seconds, captivated by his features. Even if she could only see the back of him, he still looked absolutely *divine* to her. Cinder took a glimpse at Nikos, and rage once again came back to her almost immediately.

That little slut was *blushing!* Blushing! How dare she *blush* at her Jaune!

Cinder was so angry that she completely forgot about trying to go unnoticed and glared for just a little too long at Nikos.

Her heart jumped as they locked eyes with each other. She instantly brought her head back from around the corner, shaken from having finally been caught. Jealousy, rage, and love surged inside of her, making her entire body tremble.

"You alright, Pyrrha?" Jaune asked, sounding taken off-guard.

Yet another wave of fury hit Cinder.

Jaune shouldn't feel concern for Pyrrha Nikos, he shouldn't feel *anything* for her! She didn't deserve it!

"Yea, I'm fine," Nikos said with a sigh. "Let's start heading up to the roof so we can start our training."

I'm going to kill this little slut!

Pyrrha walked down the hallway, happy that the end of the day had finally come.

It wasn't like she had had a bad day, in fact it had been a rather good one, she was just looking forward to her training with Jaune, which always took place in the later part of the evening. The time they

spent together on the roof was always one of the best parts of her days.

Seeing her partner in the hallway, she quickened her pace,

"Oh, hey Pyrrha! Are you ready to start our training? I was just telling Ruby about how much you've been helping me to improve."

Pyrrha smiled to herself as Jaune greeted her, blushing at his praise. She was happy to have been able to help him make so much progress, and it only made it all the more worth it if he thought more of her for it.

Over their months on a team together, the two of them had become close friends. Growing up, her titles and success had made it hard for her to find real friends, people who liked Pyrrha Nikos and not the Invincible Girl. It was why she valued her friendships at Beacon so much, especially her and Jaune's.

She was close with everyone on her team as well as part of Team RWBY, but it'd be a lie to say she didn't feel as though what she had with Jaune went a little deeper.

I just hope he feels the same way...

"T-thank you, Jaune. Do not sell yourself short, though. I may be teaching you but it's your own hard work that makes the real difference," she responded.

She meant what she said. Pyrrha was the one training him, but it wasn't like his improvement was entirely because of her, no matter what Weiss said. At any point, he couldn't have laid down and given up, but he didn't. It only made her respect him even more.

Her blush got even worse. Just as it was beginning to calm down, too.

"Anyway, let's go up to-" Pyrrha cut herself off, seeing something out of the corner of her eye.

Looking past Jaune, she saw a black-haired girl staring at her with amber eyes. Pyrrha only got a brief glimpse of her. As soon as they made eye contact with each other, the girl ducked back behind the wall and out of her vision.

A frown crept its way onto Pyrrha's face. It seems Beacon had spoiled her.

Back home in Minstral, she had gotten rather used to more... enthusiastic fans. There was a surprisingly high number of them. Unfortunately, it was just one of the downsides of being a popular public figure. She hadn't yet encountered any at Beacon, but she supposed she should have expected to come across one eventually.

"You alright, Pyrrha?" Jaune asked, clearly a little concerned.

"Yea, I'm fine," she said with a sigh. "Let's start heading up to the roof so we can start our training."

"Yea, let's do it," he said, smiling at her.

Almost instantaneously, her frown disappeared, having already forgotten about the supposed stalker-fan.

Pyrrha occasionally glanced up at him as they made their way towards the roof. Most people probably wouldn't have considered him good-looking, but Pyrrha was not most people.

Maybe she was biased, but she actually considered her partner to be quite handsome. Yang's teasing did nothing to change her mind on that, no matter how much she did so.

Why can't I just tell him how I feel?

In the starting days of her career, Pyrrha was always labeled the underdog, yet no matter how many people said she would lose, she

faced her opponents confidently and without fear. And here she was, scared stiff by a boy. The irony was not lost on her.

Maybe she should just say something right now? The sooner the better, right? Besides, if he said no their training would help take her mind off of it.

The thought of rejection had the exact opposite of the intended effect and only made a confession seem even more terrifying.

It's not like he's going to laugh at me or something. Sure, it might make things a little weird if he turns me down, but there's no way he'd cut off our friendship for asking.

Besides, if she didn't say something soon, who's to say she ever would? It also wasn't like every single girl he flirted with was going to turn him down, eventually someone might say yes to him if she didn't act quickly.

Pyrrha paused before walking out the door to the roof, finding a seemingly random burst of confidence.

"H-hey Jaune, can I... can I ask you something?"

"Yea, what's up Pyr?" he said, turning to her.

"Well I... I ah," Pyrrha cleared her throat. "I was just wondering if you would like to go out to Vale with me tomorrow?" Her words came out so fast it was amazing that he understood her.

"Oh yea, sure."

Her heart soared...

"We can get Ren and Nora to come along with us, too, I'm sure they'd love to go. Good idea to make the most of our last day of break," he said, wearing the same smile he was earlier.

... and crashed back down.

Apparently, he had misinterpreted what she was trying to say. Was she really not being obvious enough, or was he just trying to tell her he wasn't interested without hurting her feelings? Knowing Jaune, it was probably the former.

Oh well. She'd just have to try again at another time and make it more clear. If she could muster the courage again, that is.

She had a feeling this was going to be harder than she thought it would be...

Cinder stalked through the hallway, grinding her teeth together in anger.

I need to find a way to deal with Nikos. What makes her think she has the right to be anywhere near him!?

The way she talked to him, as if she was worthy to do so, made her sick. If Jaune hadn't been there too, Cinder would've killed her and left nothing for her family to bury, made her regret ever speaking to him.

*She doesn't deserve to even look at him, much less be his friend!
The millisecond she tries to lay her dirty hands on my Jaune I'll make sure she wishes her father never met his mother!*

Fire began to leak out from Cinder's clenched fists. She had to keep herself under control.

While her anger was absolutely justified, she would have to make sure to keep her temper in check if she wanted Jaune to love her back.

Cinder leaned against the wall for support, took a few deep breaths again and closed her eyes for a couple seconds. When she opened them again, she looked around and tried to figure out where she

actually was and how to get back to her dorm, but noticed something else that caught her attention.

She had been so mad she didn't realize nor care where she was going, but had somehow ended up back at Jaune's dorm room. It was like her body was just naturally drawn to anything he was associated with.

Cinder smiled to herself. This was exactly what she needed to clear her mind.

She leaned against the door, just like she'd done the day before when they had finally been reunited. Just being so close to where he slept was enough to dissipate her anger.

Maybe I can get in? I know Jaune and that Nikos bitch aren't here, but what about the other two on JNPR, Lie Ren and Nora Valkyrie? I'll need to make sure they aren't currently inside.

She could just knock on the door and see if anyone answered, and if they did she could simply pretend to have gotten the wrong room number. That would be awkward, sure, but not suspicious. It was a no risk, high reward situation.

The decision couldn't have been easier.

Cinder brought her fist up and knocked three times on the door, loud enough so that she was sure anyone on the other side of the door would hear her. There was no response. No one to open the door, no noise from inside the room, nothing.

She knocked again. Still nothing.

Her smile widened. She tried twisting the knob and found it unlocked.

Cinder was too excited to even think of an excuse as she opened the door, but luckily nobody was inside.

She stepped through the door and shut it behind her. Her heart fluttered as she looked around, thinking about how he lived in that very room. Jaune may have not been with her, but being there made her feel so *close* to him. It was a great feeling.

There were four beds up against the far wall, one for every team member, each with a drawer beside it for storing clothes and whatever else.

Her smile somehow got even bigger as she began looking through the drawers, trying to find out which one belonged to her Jaune. She started on the left, but found it full of woman's clothes and moved onto the next one. The second drawer was the same story. She opened the third drawer to find a collection of men's clothes and paused.

There's that other guy on his team, Lie Ren. I have to be careful to make sure I don't touch any of his stuff.

Cinder was completely and utterly loyal to Jaune, and putting her hands on any other men's clothing would be a blatant violation of that loyalty unless it was absolutely necessary. The thought of betraying her beloved filled her with disgust.

Opening the last drawer, she compared the clothing in each, trying to figure out which belonged to Jaune and which belonged to his teammate. She knew from her own observations that his teammate was a few inches shorter than her beloved, who stood around six feet tall, so it would make sense for the larger clothes to belong to him. It was hard to tell which were bigger when they were folded up in the cabinet, though.

Deciding that it was, in fact, absolutely necessary, Cinder took a shirt out of each drawer and compared them, dropping the one in her left as soon as she found the one in her right to be slightly larger.

I'm sorry, Jaune. I only touched it because I needed to to make sure.

She looked through the drawer the larger shirt had come from and found a number of pants, shirts, and sweatshirts, a tag on one of them which had 'Jaune Arc' written in sharpie, confirming that all of this did, indeed, belong to her beloved.

Cinder giggled as she rummaged through his clothes. Picking out a random sweatshirt, she brought it up to her face and inhaled. His scent was intoxicating. She sat down on what was presumably his bed and continued to breathe it in, unable to get enough.

After a few minutes she decided that it was probably best to get going. It would be a bad look if he or one of his teammates walked in on her burying her face into his clothes. No way she'd be leaving empty-handed though. Surely he wouldn't miss a singular hoodie?

Cinder reluctantly walked back towards the door, taking a black hoodie with her. Before leaving, she took one final look at his room.

"Don't worry, Jaune, I promise I'll talk to you tomorrow. Then we can finally be together," she said, giggling to herself.

Finally, she pushed the door open again to see Mercury turn and stare at her.

Chapter 4

Cinder needed to be more careful.

First, that Nikos slut had seen her staring at her. She'd been too angry to even think about trying to stay hidden, and how could she not be? That bitch was all over him! And now that she'd been caught, Nikos would have an excuse to try and keep her away from Jaune.

I dare her to try and keep us apart, I fucking dare her! I'll tear her apart!

As if that wasn't enough, Mercury then caught her leaving her beloved's room, and it seemed she would have to worry about his loyalty now that he knew what it was that Cinder was really after.

Simply put, she had to make him scared of her. Of course, he already feared her to some extent, but now he could be a liability and it was important that he know exactly what would happen to him if he tried to leave.

"This is not a discussion we're going to have," Cinder said. "If you have any complaints about my leadership, then I suggest you keep them to yourself. For your own sake."

Mercury looked back at her in shock. "So what, I'm supposed to just ignore this? What about our plans?" He spoke angrily but with restraint.

Cinder glared back at him, looking him straight in the eyes. "My plans for the Vytal Festival are currently under review. Whatever I decide to do, I expect you to follow my orders and accept whatever task you are given."

She didn't want to have this conversation with him anytime soon, but unfortunately, she had been given little choice. Cinder was caught red-handed, which of course raised some questions from Mercury.

What was she supposed to say? She had been in someone else's room holding a boy's hoodie. That wasn't exactly something she could explain away, and telling him "don't worry about it" or "don't ask questions" would only make him more suspicious.

Suspicion and loyalty hardly worked well together.

Besides, he would have to know eventually, so while it wasn't ideal that he figured it out now, it certainly wasn't the end of the world.

Mercury pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed with frustration. "Fine. I- just... explain this to me one more time. Make sure I understand what's going on, because I'm still not sure I get it. You are... in *love* with... what's the guy's name?"

"Jaune! Jaune Arc," she snapped back at him. His disrespect, both to her and her Jaune, was completely unacceptable.

Mercury recoiled in surprise. He spoke slowly, apparently still trying to process the situation. "Okay, okay. You're in love with Jaune Arc? That nobody from Nikos' team?" He flinched as soon as the words left his mouth, having realized his mistake too late.

Cinder clenched her fists, growing hot with anger.

Nobody!?! How dare he call him a nobody!?! He has no clue what he's talking about!

"Listen to me *very* closely, Mercury, because I'm not going to say this again." She took a step towards him. "I'll be merciful and give you one more chance. If you ever, *ever* talk about him that way again, I am going to *kill* you. I don't care if it happens tomorrow, a week from now, or in ten years when he's my husband, I'll make you regret it, so you'd better watch your mouth. Am I understood?"

"Yea, yea, whatever," he responded, avoiding eye contact.

He hid his fear as best he could, but it was painfully clear to Cinder, who was more than happy to play into it.

" *Excuse me?*" Her tone seemed to have the intended effect.

"Yes ma'am," Mercury responded, looking down at the floor. Sweat trickled down his brow.

" *Much* better," Cinder responded. "Now, I expect your complete cooperation going forward. If you disobey or question me, or Oum-forbid speak a word against Jaune once more, I will make sure your end is *far* from peaceful."

"Right, of course ma'am," he said, clearly still angry. "I wouldn't dream of it."

"Good. Let's return to the dorm room. I'm sure Emerald has been waiting on us."

Cinder paused and looked down at the black hoodie that she was carrying in her hands. She couldn't just walk around carrying it, someone might recognize it as Jaune's and she would be caught - again. Or at the very least, Emerald would see her walk in the room with it, and then she'd have to worry about both of her underlings asking questions.

It would be a lot less suspicious in Mercury's hands, though...

But how could she possibly part with it!? Jaune had worn it, his scent was on it! It was already like a holy relic to her, even if she'd only just gotten it.

I need to keep my cover. It'll only be for a couple of minutes, then I can get it back without having to explain myself to anyone.

But Jaune had worn it...

Fine. She wouldn't have to give it up for long. As soon as they were back at their room, she would kick Emerald out and tell Mercury to

give it back.

"Hold onto this until we get back to our room," Cinder said, reluctantly holding it out to him.

The boy stared at her indignantly for a few seconds before taking it out of her hands.

It was bullshit. Complete and utter *bullshit*. Mercury always knew his boss was insane, but this was a whole new level.

Cinder Fall, the woman who had both the White Fang and the criminal underground under her thumb, the woman who would kill people for just looking at her the wrong way, had fallen in love. It didn't seem like some small crush either, not with what she'd told him and the way she reacted to his "disrespect."

It didn't make any sense whatsoever.

Cinder never seemed to love anything except power. Now it turned out that apparently "everything she'd ever done was for him" and "he's the only thing that really matters," and he was supposed to somehow pretend that had no effect on him.

How were they supposed to get anything done if she was constantly preoccupied with some random Beacon student? They were there to get the maiden powers, destroy the school, and take out as many huntsmen-in-training as possible in the process. If his boss wanted to protect one of them, that was clearly going to be an issue.

Cinder turned back to look at him, having arrived back at their dorm.

"Not a word of this to Emerald, understand? Everything we just discussed stays between you and me."

"Of course, ma'am."

He tried not to show it, but he was actually terrified of the woman. You can only see so many people die slow, painful deaths before you start to fear the cause, whether you work for them or not. It was made worse by the fact that her anger was now directed at him.

Cinder pushed the door open and the two of them walked inside. Mercury quickly threw the hoodie she had given him onto his bed, having figured out who's it was and not really wanting to hold onto it much longer. Who knows what she'd done with it.

Emerald was already there, probably having had little reason to leave. He hadn't really had one either, he was just tired of sitting around. He kind of wished he hadn't.

The girl looked up at them, curious as to where they'd been but not wanting to outright ask.

"Mercury and I were just scouting out the campus," Cinder said. She lied so easily it often made him wonder if half of what she told him was the truth.

Apparently, it wasn't.

"I trust you to learn the layout of the school as well, Emerald. I'm sure you can see the importance of doing so."

"Of course, ma'am."

Mercury had to admit he felt a little bad for Emerald. For whatever reason, she had feelings for Cinder, but it was pretty obvious that their boss wasn't going to return them. He was pretty someone else had caught her eye

Mercury let out a slight chuckle. Instantly, Cinder whipped around towards him and stared directly into his eyes, daring him to make another sound.

"Is there something you would like to share with us, Mercury?" Her voice was dripping with malice.

Emerald looked between them, surprised and confused.

"No, of course not, ma'am," he responded, speaking as carefully as possible. "I was just... remembering something funny. Nothing to do with you."

Cinder continued to glare at him. "If that's the case, then I suggest that you stay quiet," she said, finally breaking eye contact.

An awkward silence enveloped the room for a few seconds, but was quickly broken by a ringtone coming from Cinder's pocket.

"This is an important call." She didn't even bother checking to see who was calling. If he had to guess, he would say she had no clue who was doing so and just wanted them out of the room. "Make yourselves scarce," she said, motioning towards the door.

Mercury wasted no time in leaving while Emerald did so reluctantly, pausing for a second before shutting the door behind her. As soon as she did, she turned to Mercury and glared at him.

"What on Remnant did you do?"

He shrugged his shoulders in response. "Nothing, I don't know what's gotten into her. If you're that curious, why not just ask her?"

She didn't push the subject.

Cinder walked over and picked Jaune's hoodie off of Mercury's bed as soon as he and Emerald were out of the room, ignoring the ringing from her scroll. He was wise to let go of it.

As soon as it was back in her hands, she hugged it against her body and brought it up to her face, breathing in its scent. It had been

torturous having to give it up, even if it was only for a minute or two.

Sitting down on her bed, she finally took her scroll out of her pocket to decline the call, but sighed in frustration when she saw that it was Watts calling her. She had expected it to be from an unknown caller who had simply dialed the wrong number, but no such luck. At least it had served as a convenient excuse to get her "teammates" out of the room.

Cinder accepted the call, knowing that he would only annoy her further if she declined it.

"Cinder," the voice on the other end growled out. It seems that he was just as upset to see her as she was to see him. Strange, considering it was him who called.

"What do you want," Cinder barked back at him. "I have a lot of very important business to take care of here, and I don't have time to sit around talking to you."

"Oh, I'm *sure*. " His sarcastic tone made her wish he was there in-person so she could cave his face in. "In case you're wondering why I'm calling, that would be because there is a break-in in the student file rooms currently being investigated at Beacon Academy. One Jaune Arc's file has been reported as 'missing or stolen.' Now, you wouldn't happen to *know* anything about that, would you?"

Cinder wasn't worried. Her cover had been perfectly constructed and she doubted there was any real chance for them to find out that she was the perpetrator. Besides, she had gotten some extremely valuable information out of it.

"I think you can figure that one out for yourself. Trust me, Watts, this makes no difference to us. Is this all you're calling for, or is there something else you wanted to discuss?"

Her words clearly had an effect on him. Honestly, that was a little bit amusing to her.

"We can *not* afford to have you under Ozpin's suspicion because you've been marching around melting doorknobs! Was it really that important to get the file on the Arc boy?!"

"Yes, it was," she responded immediately. "Now I do believe I have better things to do at the moment than discuss this with you." Cinder hung up with a smirk.

Almost instantly, he tried calling her again. She hung up. He wasn't important. Only Jaune was.

Even Watts' bickering wasn't enough to dampen her mood. Usually, her day would've been ruined by something like that, but right now she only felt mild irritation. Jaune's hoodie just made it impossible for her to be upset.

Cinder gleamed with joy as she pulled his hoodie over her head, reveling in his scent. Wearing it felt like he was right there with her, wrapping his arms around her, pulling her close and saying how much he loved her. There really wasn't anything like it. She didn't think there was anything in the world that could make her take it off.

Oh Oum, I can't wait until we're together and I can take more of his clothes!

Something on the inside of the collar caught her eye. It was tiny, almost invisible. She wouldn't have noticed it under any other circumstance, but this was Jaune she was dealing with.

Her heartbeat got even quicker. She carefully picked the thin yellow strand off the fabric between her fingers and placed it in her palm. It may have been small, but it was far from insignificant to Cinder.

This was a piece of him! A part of his perfect, glowing blonde hair, and now she had it right in her hands! His hair was one of her favorite things about him, which was saying quite a lot. It was almost like a mystical object, a gift hand-delivered to her straight from the heavens by her beloved blonde angel.

She had to preserve this. Its size would make it easy to lose, and she didn't think she could bear for that to happen.

But where could she put it? A plastic baggie would've been nice, but she didn't have any on hand, and it was unlikely Emerald or Mercury had any reason to bring any. She really didn't have anything too convenient on hand.

It seems a drawer will have to do. I'll just put it here until I can get a better way of storing it.

"Oh Jaune, your hair is so beautiful. I hope you'll let me put my hands through it when we're finally together," she said, giggling and opening a drawer on her bedside table. She placed it inside the drawer as carefully as possible, as if it would somehow split into pieces if she was too rough with it.

Cinder couldn't wait for the next day as she got into her bed and pulled the sheets over herself, obscuring her choice of clothing. Tomorrow she would finally, after so many years apart, *finally* talk to him.

For months she had been preparing for their reunion, going through every possible scenario, thinking of everything she could say and every way he might respond. Not only that, but she'd also invested a pretty significant amount of effort on her appearance.

Over the month leading up to their arrival at Beacon, Cinder had put more time than ever before into her looks, and, in her own humble opinion, she was gorgeous. She scrubbed every square inch of her skin with soap twice a day, used the most expensive and luxurious hair products she could find, and got her hands on the best make-up Vale had to offer, and that wasn't even everything. It worked like a charm, if Emerald's longing gazes were anything to go by.

It wasn't for Emerald, though, it never was. It would only be worth it if it helped to make Jaune notice her, and she was sure that it would.

He'd certainly seen her when they bumped into each other in the hallway the day before, so maybe it already did and he was thinking about her at that very moment? Maybe he even recognized her, and was waiting to find her alone just as she was him?

She bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. The thought alone was nearly enough to make her pass out.

Before going to sleep, she took her scroll out and pulled up the pictures she had taken of him in the library. No camera could do him justice, of course, but he still looked absolutely stunning in them.

He was just so wonderful, so pure.

So innocent.

Cinder smirked, her face tinted red.

I'd just love to take that away from him.

She really couldn't help it, she was just too excited to have him! How could anyone possibly look at a man like that and *not* want to take him?

That was exactly why he needed her. Only she could protect him from all those degenerates like that *slut* Nikos who would try something on him. He'd only get hurt if she wasn't there to keep him safe.

Her grip tightened around her scroll, nearly crushing it in her hand.

Calm down. He'll be yours one day. And you already have his hoodie, remember? And his hair, too.

Cinder's mood took yet another one-eighty as she reminded herself about all that she'd accomplished. In a way, he was closer to her in that moment than he was to Nikos. Besides, there really wasn't anything to worry about. Jaune wouldn't have a single thought of his

partner once he saw Cinder and how beautiful she was. Surely, then he'd realize that she was the only one worthy of his heart.

"Oh Jaune, if only you knew what you do to me," she said, still staring at the picture of him on her scroll. "You'll love me back one day, I just know it."

As usual, Cinder woke up early, hours before Emerald and Mercury would. Looking at the clock, she saw it was only about 4:00 a.m.

She was beaming before even getting out of bed. Jaune, in all his glory, had come to her in her dreams as per her nightly schedule. They'd been getting married.

It was somewhere in Mistrel, where she'd always figured they'd live together, but that wasn't the best part, not even close. That had been Jaune, obviously.

He was nothing short of breathtaking in that suit. His glowing hair, his sapphire eyes, his handsome face... somehow, he looked even better than usual, if that was even possible.

The way he had looked at her was filled with so much love, so much affection. She'd nearly melted on the spot, and it was just a dream! Unfortunately, it didn't last too long. She didn't get too much sleep because of her excitement.

It was certainly a good way to start off her day, but it would only go up from there. She was going to find Jaune, talk to him, see if he recognized her from the Glass Unicorn, and if he didn't then she'd simply start from scratch.

Part of her hoped he would because it would make it easier to become friends with him, but another part of her didn't want him to look at her and see the weak, pathetic little girl that she'd been back then. She was so much better now, she'd become better for him, and he needed to see the new Cinder Fall.

And so she decided. If he recognized her, she'd take advantage of that as best she could, but if he didn't, she wasn't going to remind him of anything.

Cinder reluctantly took Jaune's hoodie off and hid it under the sheets, then slowly walked through the darkness to the bathroom, bringing her Haven uniform with her. Closing the door behind her, she turned the light on and stared at herself in the mirror. What she saw was absolutely unpresentable.

She looked completely unkempt. Her hair was a mess, her clothes were disheveled, and there were clear bags under her eyes. Of course, she didn't necessarily look bad, but by no means was *this* good enough. Not for Jaune. She had to clean herself up.

It took her hours, but once she showered, got changed, and put her makeup on, she left the bathroom and walked back into the bedroom, seeing that Emerald and Mercury were also up.

"Emerald, Mercury, I'm glad to see that you two are awake. As you know, there are no classes today, so I expect you to spend your time integrating yourselves within the students."

"Of course, ma'am," Emerald responded.

Cinder smirked. She was just oh-so-easy to control.

"And you, Mercury?" She stared at the boy directly in the eyes. "Am I correct in assuming you will be doing what I ask of you?"

"Yea, seems easy enough," he said, returning her gaze.

"Excellent. Now, I have some more specific instructions for the both of you." Seeing that she had their attention, Cinder continued. "There are two teams that have caught my interest for their members, both of them freshman. The first, Team RWBY, is led by Ruby Rose, the

girl responsible for stopping Roman's dust robbery, who was also put two years ahead in her education."

"You think she's one of Ozpin's lackeys?" Mercury asked. "I mean, it doesn't make much sense to put some fifteen-year-old in Beacon and then let her lead her team on top of that."

"I wouldn't be too surprised if she's already a part of his inner circle, even if she is quite young."

There was also her "friendship" with Jaune, something that Cinder wasn't sure she approved of after observing them the day before. She was still disgusted over that nickname the girl had for him.

She'd better not call him anything like that again, because I will most certainly not be as kind about it as Jaune was!

"It's not just their leader though," she continued. "Weiss Schnee, heiress to the Schnee Dust Company, is also on the team. I don't have to explain why she's important. The other two hold no significance beyond their relationship to their leader and the Schnee."

"You want us to get information on them," Emerald said.

"Precisely. Emerald, I'm assigning you the task of befriending Ruby Rose and investigating her and her team."

The girl nodded in response. "I'll get it done, ma'am. As for the other team you're interested in?"

"That would be Team JNPR, of which Pyrrha Nikos is a noteworthy member, as she is a likely maiden candidate." The expression on Mercury's face said he already knew where this was going. "Mercury, I'm giving you the same job I gave Emerald. Form relationships with JNPR's members and report any intel you get back to me. Do you understand your task?"

"Yea, I think I get it."

He knew exactly what it was she was asking of him, and it had a lot less to do with Nikos than it did her leader.

"You start today. As for myself, I will be doing something similar, as well as pursuing some personal goals of mine." Cinder looked between them. "I trust you both to work independently, and assume you will do the same for me. Frankly, I don't want either of you interfering with my work."

"We understand, ma'am," Emerald replied.

"I have business to attend to that requires me elsewhere," she said, already heading towards the door. "Get started when you're ready to do so, but don't take too long. You know I don't like to wait."

Cinder left the room, leaving Mercury and Emerald to their own devices. She was confident enough in her authority to allow them to do their jobs without supervision, and she had better things to do than watch their every move. Like watching Jaune's every move.

Instead of actively searching for him, she decided to first try waiting for him in the library. That's where she found him the day before, plus it would be much easier to come up with an excuse to talk to him than if she tracked him down at some random part of campus. She was fairly certain "I have a deep, obsessive love for you" wasn't an acceptable reason yet, no matter how much she'd like to say that to him.

The sun was only just beginning to rise, and hardly any students were outside their dorms. Cinder only saw two or three other people in the hallways and library, one of them being the Belladonna girl from Team RWBY. Under other circumstances, that might've been more interesting to her.

Finding an empty table close to the door, Cinder pulled a book off the shelf and took a seat, appearing to be reading while keeping an eye

on the entrance.

And so she started waiting.

Students came and went, most not staying too long. The girl on Team RWBY left after an hour or two.

It never got all that crowded, but she still hoped there would be less people around once she found Jaune. They would need to talk in private.

At some point, some ginger boy started staring at her from across the library. A threatening glare shut that down for a while.

Much to her ire, though, it didn't stop it completely. Every few minutes, he would catch a glance at her, and everytime she would give him a look that said she wanted nothing less than for him to ogle her, but he just wouldn't leave her alone. His persistence was infuriating.

She once again looked up and caught him looking, but instead of directing his gaze elsewhere when he saw her glare, this time he just looked back and smirked at her, leaning back in his chair.

Cinder scowled and clenched her fist. What the hell did he think he was doing!? If there wasn't anyone else around, she would've marched over there and burnt him to a crisp.

Unfortunately, she couldn't just kill him, but she could still give him a piece of her mind. Having dealt with people like him all throughout her career, she long ago learned that there's no greater counter to arrogance than embarrassment. All she had to do was simply call him out.

Just as she was about to push her chair out and get up, something else caught her attention. *He* came in. She instantly forgot about the ginger boy.

Jaune was here! Her plan had worked, and now she could finally talk to him and make the first steps towards their relationship!

Her breathing got heavy with excitement as she watched her beloved walk through the library, carrying with him a number of papers and textbooks.

He really does have the face of an angel!

Cinder's heart stopped as he looked back at her, his eyes catching hers. She was totally unable to stop herself from smiling at him, and didn't really want to, either. Jaune gave her a nervous smile back and quickly broke away from the eye contact, a blush creeping its way onto his face.

Her heartbeat came back quicker now, pounding in her ears.

It was just too good to be true. Jaune, her will-be husband, her sweet, sweet, beloved Jaune, had smiled at her. This wasn't happening. It was just another one of her wonderful dreams, one that just happened to feel very real, and soon she'd wake up and find that none of this had really happened, because this was just too damn good to be true.

She bit her tongue, hard. Yet she didn't jolt awake and find herself back in her dorm as she half-expected to.

Cinder watched as he took a seat just a few tables away from her and began reading one of his books. It took everything she had not to run over there and pounce on him.

It was like her body had a will of its own. Still not having an excuse prepared, she closed her book and got out of her seat, finding herself completely unable to resist him.

What was she doing?! All she needed to do was wait a little longer, but she just couldn't help herself, and now she was going to mess everything up!

Jaune was having a bad week. To put it simply, he felt stuck. It was hard to tell if he was even making progress on his combat skills, even with his training with Pyrrha.

And just to add on to that was the fact that Cardin Winchester, the second most useless fighter in the school, constantly kicked his butt in front of everyone. Even worse was the fact that "everyone" happened to include Weiss.

Then there was that thing with the files. Seriously, what was he supposed to know about any of that?

So yea, he just needed to be alone right now. Luckily, he could usually get away from everyone by coming to the library. It's not like he didn't like his friends, he loved them, but there were moments when he just had to get away from it all. The library and its silence was great for that.

Might as well also get some homework done while he was there.

"Excuse me, I was wondering if I could borrow a pencil?"

Turning to his left, he saw the source of the voice, a tall, raven-haired girl, leaning over his table. It was the same girl who had just smiled at him, but that was probably just her being polite.

At this point, Jaune was used to being around rather beautiful women. There was Weiss, of course, but there was also his partner, Pyrrha, and the rest of team RWBY, not that he'd actually say all that out loud. Especially not to Pyrrha. That would make things *really* awkward.

That being said, the one in front of him right now was on another level entirely. She looked *good* .

Get a hold of yourself, it's just hormones!

"I thought I had brought one with me, but I must have dropped it on the way here. You wouldn't happen to have another one with you, would you?"

She had the voice to go along with the looks, too.

Calm down, Jaune. She's just asking you for a pencil. It's not like she wants to marry you or something.

"Y-yea, I, uh, I'm pretty sure I have an extra somewhere- ah, here it is. There you go."

Jaune handed the girl the extra pencil he had brought with him. Seeing her again, she looked somewhat familiar to him, but he probably would have remembered if he met someone this beautiful.

Chill out already. She doesn't want to talk to you, she's just here because she needs to get some work done and forget a pencil. You don't even know her name.

"Thank you." The girl paused. Surprisingly enough, she didn't immediately leave with his pencil.

"I feel like I recognize you from somewhere..." Apparently having figured it out, she suddenly snapped her finger. "You're Jaune, aren't you? I saw you on the roster for a few of my classes."

"Yea, that's me, Jaune Arc," he said, doing his best not to seem too nervous. He had a feeling he wasn't doing too great at that.

It was honestly a little weird. He had approached a ton of women before, albeit widely unsuccessfully, but he had never been so anxious about it. Or at least never *acted* so anxious about it. Maybe it was just because she was the one approaching him, even if she wasn't flirting with him.

"You must be from Haven, right?"

"Yes, me and my team are here to participate in the Vytal Tournament. My name is Cinder Fall."

"Nice to meet you, Cinder," he responded, taking her outstretched hand and shaking it.

"Likewise, Jaune Arc. Do you mind if I take a seat here?"

Well, that was certainly unexpected. He was honestly surprised that she hadn't already left, but he wasn't complaining.

"Oh, yea, make yourself comfortable."

"So how do you like Beacon?" he asked, finally having gathered his confidence. "Have you been here long?"

"We've only been here for a few days, but our stay has been pleasant thus far. As for you, Jaune? Do you enjoy being a student here?"

"Yea, it's pretty awesome. I got really lucky and got a great team, too. How about Haven? I've heard that it's a rather cut-throat school."

Cinder cleared her throat. "Well, the classes are fairly difficult, but it's all exaggerated. I've personally never had too much trouble there. I'll bet Beacon is harder, you must be pretty talented to have gotten in."

Jaune averted his eyes. He generally preferred not to talk about his "acceptance" into Beacon.

"I, ah, w-well, I'm really not anything special, especially not compared to all the other students here," he said, letting out a quiet chuckle. "I mean, just look at my partner."

"Don't talk about yourself like that." Her tone took a complete one-eighty, and he nearly jumped at how forcefully she spoke. "If you spend your time constantly comparing yourself to others, you'll never feel good enough, no matter how amazing you are," she continued, once again talking in the soft tone she had spoken with earlier.

That... actually seemed like pretty good advice. Jaune had developed a habit of comparing himself to people better than him since arriving at Beacon, sometimes consciously and sometimes not. Being around someone like Pyrrha could make it hard not to.

But maybe it would be better to try and look at his own skill separate from everyone else's? Being a huntsman's not about being the strongest, hell, not even about not being the weakest, it was just about helping people.

As long as I get strong enough to help people, who cares whether or not Cardin can beat the crap out of me?

Actually, that sounded kinda pathetic. Still, though, it seemed like a good idea to him.

"I guess you're right about that." Jaune cracked a smile. "So how do you like your chances in the Vytal Tournament?" he asked, trying to change the topic to something a little more light-hearted.

Cinder smirked and tilted her head. "Trying to scout out the competition? Well, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but unfortunately I can't just give out all of my secrets like that."

"T-that's not what I was-!"

"I'm just joking with you," she said, giggling at his reaction. "But to answer your question, I'm actually feeling rather confident. If you'd like, I could-"

Before the girl could finish, a third voice entered the conversation.

"I'm very sorry to interrupt, but could I talk to you in private for a second, Jaune?"

Jaune looked over to see Pyrrha standing just to his left. He hadn't noticed her come in. For some reason, it made him feel like he had been caught in something.

"Oh, yea." Turning back to Cinder, he smiled apologetically. "Sorry, I gotta go. See you around."

The girl mumbled something in response, but he didn't catch what she said.

"No, no, I understand..."

Cinder yearned to jump up and *burn* Nikos for taking him away from her.

In truth, she didn't understand. She had no clue why he was choosing to leave her and run off with that *slut* or what she had done to make him so ready to do so. Whatever it was, she hated her for it. She hated her with all her being. She hated Pyrrha Nikos almost as much as she loved Jaune. Almost.

Her heart was full of longing as she watched him leave the library. That *whore* just couldn't stay away. One day, and one day soon, she'd pay the price for trying to keep her Jaune away from her.

She could do it during the fall. It would be oh so easy to take advantage of the chaos and get rid of her, but the problem with that was that her plans for Beacon were currently being... reconsidered. As far as Salem was concerned, her main reason for being there in the first place was to take the maiden powers, and while that had originally been the case, Jaune's presence changed things.

He might get hurt. If she went through with it, she would be a maiden, Salem would still be confident in her seemingly unshakable loyalty, and it would give her the chance to take care of Nikos.

But Jaune could get hurt. And he might see her if she wasn't careful. If she was going to do it, she needed a way of keeping him safe and making sure nobody knew who the perpetrator was.

If he did as he was told, Mercury would be close to him by that point. She could tell him to keep Jaune safe, and she knew that he was more than capable to do so. If everything went as planned, being caught wouldn't be a problem, either. She had enough common sense to know that advertising herself during the whole ordeal wouldn't help her, so obviously she'd planned around taking the maiden powers without witnesses.

But still, there was a chance. If something happened to him, she'd never forgive herself. Never.

Cinder clenched her fist and grinded her teeth together. What was she supposed to do? She needed the maiden powers, and Nikos had to die. But Jaune couldn't get hurt. He just couldn't.

But how else was she going to get the maiden powers?

Chapter 5

Jaune stared blankly ahead, having already zoned out of Professor Oobleck's lecture. It was hard not to with how fast he spoke. Seriously, how did he even *think* that quickly?

However he did it, it certainly wasn't helping his grades.

Hey, at least Oobleck didn't call him up to the front and make him fight Cardin every other week. Only Goodwitch reserved that right.

Unable to even try pretending like he was paying attention, Jaune leaned forward and put his head down on his desk, his eyelids growing heavier by the second. It was the last class of the day, it wasn't really that big a deal if he dozed off for a second, was it?

"Jaune? Perhaps you might be able to give us an answer?"

Jaune jolted up. Somehow, he had completely forgotten about his history teacher's tendency to put people on the spot.

"I-er, I uhh... well..." As if not having an answer wasn't embarrassing enough, now he was fumbling his words. "Could I have the question again?"

Oobleck paused for a few seconds, staring at him with disappointment, before sighing and repeating himself.

"I was just asking which major city trusted General Cadmore with its protection during the first half of the Great War. I don't suppose you have an answer?"

His mind drew a blank as he looked around and saw almost everyone else in the class staring at him. When had they ever learned about General Cadmore?

Well, probably at some point when he was half-asleep, but was that really relevant?

"It was Minstrel." A familiar-sounding voice came from behind him, just loud enough for him to hear.

He cleared his throat. "Minstrel. The answer is Minstrel."

"Very good. I'm glad to see you were paying attention after all," Oobleck said, before going right back to teaching at break-neck pace.

Jaune looked behind him to see his savior. Cinder Fall, the girl from the library, looked back at him. He flashed her an awkward smile that, against all odds, was reciprocated.

She seemed like a nice girl. She had stayed and talked to him up until Pyrrha pulled him aside, too, so he supposed she must've thought something similar of him. He sure *hoped* she did.

The rest of class went by largely ignored by Jaune. He only noticed class had even ended because of his partner grabbing his attention.

"Hey, Jaune, we can go now. Class is over." Pyrrha put her hand on his shoulder and motioned towards the door, where everyone else was already headed.

"Oh, yea. Sorry, I was lost in thought for a little while there."

"Are you alright, Jaune?" She looked at him with concern. "You know you can talk to me and the rest of the team if you need to."

What kind of a question was that? Of course he was! He was... fine. He'd just been having a rough go of things, that was all.

It wasn't like he hadn't been prepared for Beacon to be a challenge. It was just that, well... he hadn't really been prepared to feel so *embarrassed* about it all.

What had he told Pyrrha? That he was "tired of being the loveable idiot stuck in the tree" or something along those lines? He had since managed to swallow his pride and accept her help, but that still hadn't changed. He was still holding his team back. As their leader, the expectation was that he would help them to succeed, but he was just doing the opposite, and it was quite frankly humiliating.

Pyrrha didn't need to know that, though. She was already dealing with plenty of expectations herself, and the last thing she needed was for him to dump all of his emotions on her.

"I'm fine, Pyrrha," he said, managing a smile. "Just tired is all. Had trouble falling asleep last night and it's finally starting to catch up to me. Sleep deprivation hits in the afternoon, you know."

"If you say so," she said hesitantly. "Just know I'm here for you. We all are."

"Thanks, Pyrrha, I appreciate that. Let's head back to the dorm now that classes are over."

The two of them met up with Ren and Nora, who were waiting by the door, and started to head back to their dorm room. That wasn't really where he wanted to be, though. He needed to clear his head, and being cooped up in a room with three other people was not going to help him do that, no matter how close he was to those people.

"Hey, I think I'm gonna take a quick walk around campus, get my blood flowing. You guys head back to the dorm and I'll be there soon."

"Where are you going?" Nora gasped, getting what she surely thought was the best idea in human-faunus history. "We should go into Vale for the night!"

"Nora, it's a school night," Ren said, saving him from whatever antics Nora was hoping to get into. "Besides, I think Jaune wants to be alone."

Jaune nodded. "Yea, I'd rather just get out by myself. Get some me-time."

He turned around towards the nearest exit, but paused when he heard Pyrrha's voice.

"Just... be back soon, okay Jaune?"

He returned her smile with one of his own, a real one this time.

"Yea, I won't be too long."

As soon as he got outside, he took a deep breath, taking in his surroundings. The weather was nice and warm, and the leaves were beginning to turn from green to yellow and red. It was a part of the year he always looked enjoyed.

There were plenty of other students walking around campus, most having just been released from class and were walking back to the dorms, while others like him just needed to get outside after a long day. Everything seemed so lively, contrasting with the dull classrooms he was finally getting away from.

Jaune found a wooden bench to sit down on and leaned back, looking straight up towards the sky. Clouds were few and far between. The general peacefulness made all his worrying seem pretty silly.

How could I have possibly been so upset on a day like this?

He sat there for what must have been close to an hour, just watching people come and go and the clouds drift across the sky. He really didn't want to leave, but unfortunately he couldn't just stay there forever. Eventually, he prepared to get up off the bench and go back to his dorm, but, once again, a familiar voice came from behind him, making him jump.

"Once again, fate brings us together. Perhaps it's trying to tell us something?"

Cinder leaned against the back of the bench, grinning at him.

"Hey, Cinder. Thanks for bailing me out earlier. Oobleck likes to pick on people he catches dozing off. 'Classroom slumberers,' he calls them." Jaune chuckled. He would admit that it could be a *little* amusing when you weren't the one being called out.

"Oh, it was nothing," she said, walking around to the front of the bench and taking a seat right next to him. "Besides, it's a bit ridiculous for him to expect you to learn much of anything when he talks as fast as he does."

" *Thank* you! I can hardly keep up with anything he says! It's honestly amazing to me that anybody can get anything out of his classes." Jaune flushed in embarrassment, realizing that he was probably making himself look bad. "I mean, I learn enough to get okay marks, but not much more than that. And being put on the spot isn't as bad as detentions, so I suppose that makes him a little better than Ms. Goodwitch."

"I take it Goodwitch is the strict one around here. She's given you some trouble, I presume?"

"Well, she gives just about anyone trouble, I suppose, but I guess I get it worse because of my... performance. I'm... not exactly top of the class."

"That shouldn't matter. Remember what I told you yesterday?" Cinder looked him deep in the eyes. "As long as you're strong enough to help, it's nonsensical to compare yourself to your peers."

"Yea, you're right." Jaune broke eye contact and awkwardly looked around.

He had a feeling that she knew something was bothering him, after all, he was pretty bad at hiding his emotions. Hopefully she wouldn't dig into it. He left so he didn't have to weigh his team down and didn't feel like putting that all on Cinder. Fortunately, there didn't really seem to be any reason for her to ask about it.

"You don't think you're good enough to help people?"

Jaune looked at her with surprise. He was taken off guard, not entirely because she was, in fact, digging into it, but because of how right she had gotten it. They'd only even talked once, but she had read him like a book.

"I-well, that's not *exactly* true..."

Cinder gave him a look of concern and disbelief, one he'd seen on Pyrrha's face more than he would've liked to. He never was a great liar.

"I mean, I guess you wouldn't be wrong there."

"Well, that's why you're here, is it not?" Cinder put her hand on his shoulder, making his blush even worse. "To improve? No first year at any academy is ready to be a huntsman, even if they are at the top of class. You have four years here for a reason."

"I guess that would make sense. Still though, I can't help but be a little bit frustrated." Jaune chuckled. "Y'know, I usually use my partner as my emotional outlet. I'm sure she'll be grateful that I've found someone else to bother."

"Ah, yes, your partner." She paused for a few seconds, leaning forward. "Do the two of you get along well?" she asked, turning back to him.

"Oh yea, we're great friends. She's helped me out a ton this year, I seriously owe a lot to her."

"Mmhmm... Just friends, though? No budding romance on Team JNPR?"

"W-what? No! No, she's way out of my league. People would probably make fun of her if she was dating someone as weak as me," he said, laughing.

As bad as he felt about himself, it did feel kind of good to talk about it. Maybe it was just because she had forced it out of him so he didn't have to feel guilty about telling her.

Cinder leaned back against the bench.

"I can help you with that, if you would like me to."

That... was not exactly how he was expecting her to respond.

"W-with getting a date with Pyrra?!"

"No!" For the second time in their short conversation, she nearly made him jump out of his seat. "No no no, I wasn't talking about that." Cinder seemed to relax, once again switching back to the soft tone she spoke with earlier. "I meant with combat. I could help with your training every so often. We'd both be getting some extra practice, and with the Vytal Festival coming up we all need as much as we can get."

The offer was too good to be true. If he was being honest, it was a little weird to him. He had just met this girl, and now she was volunteering to help train him. For the life of him, he couldn't see why. Pity, maybe? The thought made him frown.

"I would appreciate that, but I really can't ask you to do that. Besides, I already train Tuesdays through Saturdays with my partner, so it's not like I'm not already getting plenty of help."

"I don't think you understand." Cinder shifted just a little closer to him, tightening her grip on his shoulder. "I *want* to help you. I am

asking you to accept my help."

"Seriously, I don't want to waste your time."

Cinder once again got even closer to him, pressing her body against his. "You wouldn't be wasting my time. I mean it."

Neither of them said anything for a few seconds, with Jaune trying to find a response and Cinder awaiting one.

"Well, I suppose if you'd *like* to..."

"I would." Cinder slid her hand down his arm, resting it on the outside of his thigh. He tried his best not to react to that. "Perhaps we could start tonight? If it works for you, we could meet back here in a little bit and find a good spot to train."

"Y-yea, that sounds like a good idea to me," he said, smiling but avoiding eye contact. "I've got some homework to do, but I can probably knock it out in a few hours if I work quickly. You don't mind if I come back later, do you?"

"Of course not. Just don't make me wait too long," she said playfully.

"I'll try not to. See you back here in a few hours?"

"I'll be here."

Jaune got off the bench and left to go get his combat suit, his face still tinted red.

Cinder took a sharp breath as she saw Jaune walk towards her, clad in white combat armor. It had been difficult enough to keep her composure when they were talking earlier, but now he was really testing her.

Her grip tightened around the bench's armrest, nearly crushing it. Her breathing got heavy. He was just so incredible, and he didn't

even realize it.

Her heart broke as she thought back to the conversation they had a few hours prior.

Why couldn't he see how amazing he was? "Not good enough?" Bull *shit!* He was better than everyone else on Remnant!

It was yet another reason that he needed her. He needed someone to lean on, to take solace in, and his so-called "friends" clearly were not doing a very good job at that.

There was also an opportunity to be had there. All she had to do was give him the comfort he needed and, seeing how kind she was and how little help he'd gotten from everyone else, he would fall for her in no time. Then the only thing left to do would be to make sure he stays far apart from Nikos.

Speaking of Nikos, Cinder was *not* okay with how much time she was spending with him, not at all. Five days a week they trained together! *Five!*

She took a few deep breaths, trying to get her emotions under control. Now wasn't the time to be angry. Jaune was finally here.

The smile he gave her when she waved at him made her heart melt in her chest. It was such a simple thing, his smile. Yet it was something she would do anything to see, to wake up to every morning.

"Hello, Jaune. I'm glad to see you've accepted my offer."

"Hey, Cinder. Sorry if I've kept you waiting, I should've given you a more specific time," he said, scratching the back of his neck.

"Don't worry about it. I'm the one who set this up, it was my responsibility to do so." Cinder smirked and looked him up and down, making a point to be as obvious as possible. "I must say, that

outfit looks quite good on you. Is that what you usually wear, or are you just showing off for me?"

Jaune's face became a dark shade of red. "T-thanks. Anyway, do you have anywhere on campus you want to train? I know you haven't been here very long, so I can show you a few spots if you don't have anywhere in particular."

She was a little disappointed that he didn't respond to her flirting, but she supposed that made sense. He'd only known her for a few days, at least as far as he was concerned.

I suppose I'll just have to make myself a little more clear.

"Such a gentleman. I'm really not too familiar with the campus, why don't you show me where you usually go?"

Jaune smiled at her. "Follow me, then."

He didn't have to tell her twice.

Cinder held her blade up against Jaune's chest, careful not to actually touch him with it. The point wasn't to hurt him, *gods* no, just to let him know that he had been bested. It felt awful, but it was necessary. If she didn't actually do something to let him know that he'd made a mistake, then he wouldn't improve, and if he didn't see any progress then there would be no reason to keep training with her.

"You're leaving yourself too open when you attack. If you can go on the offensive without sacrificing your defense, you'll see a huge improvement." She smiled at him, letting him know that her words held no malice. "Let's keep practicing. I feel we're getting somewhere."

Jaune let out a deep breath as she took her sword away from his chest.

"Sounds good to me," he said, wiping off the sweat that was collecting on his brow. "I'm starting to get a little tired, but I think I can go for a bit longer."

"Great. Let's go again, then."

The two of them stood opposite of each other and once again prepared to fight.

It was Jaune who decided to attack first, having realized by now that she wasn't going to take the initiative. His swing was clumsy at best. She saw a thousand different ways to punish it, and would've done so to anyone else. There was a lot to work on.

So what if he wasn't a great fighter? It didn't make her love him any less, not at all. He was still her Jaune, and nothing could change that, especially not something so trivial as below-average sword handling. Besides, he had her there to protect him. He didn't have to worry about anything.

Cinder stepped back out of range of his sword and back towards him once he finished his swing. He tried to bring it back and hit her left side, but she blocked it with Midnight before he could do any damage to her and lifted the other blade above her head. She waited until he brought his shield up to protect himself before bringing it down with just enough force to make him stumble back.

Jaune fell down into a sitting position and, for the first time that evening, didn't immediately get up. The fatigue was clearly getting to him.

"Perhaps you should focus on a more defensive fighting style? You're clearly capable on that side of things, the problems arise when you take the role as the aggressor. If you want my advice, I would say your best bet is to block your opponent's attacks and wait for them to wear themselves down before attacking them."

Jaune looked off into the distance for a few seconds, contemplating her words. "Yea, I guess I should consider that. Honestly, I've been doing the same thing for so long now it's about time I try something else."

Her knees felt weak. He was *complimenting* her! Sure, he may have only said that he would consider her advice, but did that not mean that he thought it was *good* advice? And was that not a compliment towards her in and of itself?

It was indirect praise at best, but it still meant everything to her.

Cinder took a seat next to him, close enough so that her arm was brushing against his, and took a few moments to admire his features. The moonlight seemed to accentuate the color of his blonde hair, and the sad look that'd been so prevalent in his eyes was nowhere to be found now, replaced by determination.

It was just another thing to love about him. He was amazingly determined. Despite the fact that he felt as though he was outclassed by the entire rest of Beacon's first years, he kept fighting, kept working to improve. How many times had he fallen over fighting her, only to jump right back up?

The more she learned about him, the more she loved him. It had seemed impossible for her feelings to get any stronger before she'd arrived at Beacon, and yet they had, and they continued to do so. Even now, it took every bit of her self-control not to jump on him. He was clearly too tired to fight back, and even if he did have all his strength, he probably couldn't do much to stop her.

But no, she couldn't do that to him. Unfortunately, that would run a high risk of scaring him off. She would have to wait until he was ready before making their relationship more physical.

If all goes well, I won't have to wait long. I just need to play my cards right.

"If you want to, I can keep helping you every so often. It may be beneficial to put that into practice against a more aggressive style of fighting such as mine. Perhaps we could meet back here a few days a week?"

Cinder's stomach was in a knot as she awaited his response. If he were to accept this, she would have dedicated time to spend with him every couple of days, and once they grew close it wouldn't be hard to make that a more frequent occurrence.

If he said no, though...

"That sounds like a good idea to me," he said with a shrug. "Oum knows I could use as much practice as I can get."

Her smile was so big it was honestly amazing how he didn't see her feelings right then and there.

"Great! You already train Tuesdays through Saturdays, right? Perhaps we could meet on Sundays and Mondays, if that doesn't put too much strain on you?"

There was no real way it would. Seven days a week would be brutal for anyone without aura, but for a huntsman-in-training it was all but a necessity.

"Sure. It would have to be later though, since I usually do my homework right after classes on those days."

"Oh, that's fine. I don't mind waiting. Why don't I give you my number, and that way we can stay in touch?"

Jaune smiled and reached for his pocket. "Good idea. That way we won't have to guess on times and whatnot."

She had to grip the end of his dress to stop her hand from shaking. Blood rushed to her face as she watched him take his scroll out and open a list of his contacts.

"Here, just put your number in there," he said, handing her his scroll.

Cinder briefly looked through his contacts, seeing plenty of other women, the one at the top being his partner. She would have to deal with that at some point, but now wasn't the time.

Her heart soared as she added her number to the list. Not only did she have two days out of the week to spend time with him, but now they had a way to stay in touch! She could already imagine late nights calling him, falling asleep hearing his sweet, sweet voice through the scroll.

"There you are," she said, giving it back to him.

"Thanks." Jaune put his scroll back in his pocket and stood up with a grunt. "Anyway, it's getting late. I better head back to my dorm."

Cinder stood up with him. "I suppose I'll do the same, then."

She followed him to the door and down the hallway, where they soon arrived at Team JNPR's room.

Jaune paused at the door and turned to her. "Thanks for all the help. See you around?"

"Of course. I had a great time. Call me sometime," she said with a wink.

"Yea, I'll make sure to" he said, casually opening the door and walking into his dorm, closing it behind him.

Cinder let out a sigh. Seriously, was he just immune to flirting? Outside of the occasional blush, she hadn't managed to get a reaction out of him. It didn't seem like he was just outright ignoring her advances, at least, she certainly *hoped* he wasn't. No, it was more like he just genuinely didn't see them, or didn't think she was being serious about it.

Oh well. If he didn't catch on soon, she would just tell him. The only reason she hadn't done so already was because they weren't yet close enough to guarantee that he wouldn't turn her down.

No, that wasn't quite putting it correctly. They *were* close, very much so, at least the way she saw it. He just didn't realize it yet was all.

Other than Jaune's apparent inability to see her feelings, though, everything was going *perfectly* .

He said he'd call me! Oh Oum, I can't wait to hear his voice again.

Her breath was heavy and unsteady, and she had to lean against the wall to support herself. Sweat was flowing down her face, which had turned a bright shade of red. She stayed there for a few minutes, going over every part of their meeting, remembering every little thing he had said to her, every time he had graced her with that amazing smile of his.

Once her strength returned to her, she started walking down the hallway back to her own dorm, already anticipating his inevitable call.

Pyrrha looked up from her desk at the noise of the door opening, seeing Jaune entering the room, wearing his armor and drenched in sweat. He had been gone quite a while. According to him, one of the exchange students had invited him to train with them.

"Glad to see *you* finally decided to show up," Nora said sarcastically. She wasn't being mean spirited, of course, she just joked like that sometimes.

Jaune frowned. "Have I really been gone that long?"

"Not *too* long," Pyrrha said. Only about an hour and a half. So, who was it that you were training with?"

"Oh, her name's Cinder. She's the girl I was talking with in the library the other day before you pulled me aside. Anyways, I'm gonna get in the shower, wash the sweat off."

That... wasn't what she wanted to hear. Cinder, as she now knew her, was the same person who she'd seen following her the day before, and that certainly had some implications about why she was suddenly so interested in him. It was why she'd tried separating them when they were speaking with each other.

She couldn't really see a reason for her to offer to practice with him, unless the girl was using him to try and get close to Pyrrha or get information about her.

That put her in a tricky position. It wasn't like she could just let that happen, but she already felt bad about trying to stop her by pulling Jaune aside using the excuse of discussing their own training schedule, even if she was genuinely just trying to help him.

Her train of thought was interrupted by the sound of the shower turning on from the bathroom.

"So..." Nora turned to her, smiling. "When are you gonna tell him?"

Pyrrha blushed and cleared her throat. "I'm still figuring that out."

"Yea, sure you are," she responded, rolling her eyes. "Maybe you should hurry up, it seems like you might have some competition with that Cinder girl."

"Them training together doesn't necessarily mean she *likes* him-"

Nora gasped, interrupting her. "What if she actually *does* like him?!"

Pyrrha looked at her with confusion and embarrassment. "Is that not what you were just trying to say? And keep your voice down, he might hear you!"

"In the shower? Nah, I'd have to be a lot louder. And I was just trying to give you some motivation when I said that, but now that I think about it, I only know one other person who's offered to train him, and she's super into him."

"Seriously Nora, they've only even known each other for a day or two at most!"

"Right, and how long did it take *you* to start liking him?"

"That is besides the point!" she said, blushing. "Besides, I... honestly don't really think she's actually interested in being friends with him."

It was probably a weird thing to tell them, but there was no point in keeping them in the dark. It'd be better if they knew.

"The other day, right before we were about to start our training, I saw her staring at us from around the corner. I'm pretty sure-"

"Holy Brother Gods, she's *stalking* him!" Nora jumped off of her bed, dashed over to her, and put her hands on her shoulders, her eyes wide. "Don't you see? She doesn't just *like* him, she's in *love* with him!"

"Nora, please! I really doubt that-"

Once again, she was interrupted. "Pyrrha! You have to confess to Jaune as soon as possible before this crazy obsessive stalker of his gets to him!"

" *Please* keep your voice down!"

"I agree with Nora," Ren said from the other corner of the room, rather unexpectedly. Pyrrha looked at him in shock. "Not about the stalker part."

"See? Even Renny thinks you should say something!"

Pyrrha looked between the two. Nora was still staring at her, while Ren hadn't even looked up from whatever book he was reading.

"The worst he can say is no." Ren finally closed his book and turned to her. "And he probably won't anyway. You should tell him."

She knew that, and she also knew that she couldn't just keep her feelings bottled up and continue hoping that he'd eventually see them. But at the same time, the idea of actually saying it out loud terrified her. She'd tried to do it, multiple times in fact, but she just never could bring herself to put it in words.

Eventually, though, she'd have to get past her fear of rejection. It wasn't like he'd be single forever.

Pyrrha swallowed the lump in her throat. "I... I'll tell him. I'll try to, at least."

Nora beamed. She started ranting about a love letter or something like that, but Pyrrha stopped listening.

Chapter 6

Jaune walked down the dormitory hallway, humming to himself with his hands in his jean pockets and his sword strapped to his waist. He felt a lot better today than he did the day before.

Things were finally starting to look up for him. For one thing, he'd finally managed to get caught up on all his school work, and on top of that Cinder had offered to help him out with his training. At first he thought she might've just felt bad for him, but after talking to her some more it really did seem like she was just a nice person who genuinely wanted to lend a hand to him.

She'd also given him her number, which was a bonus. It obviously wasn't anything romantic, but it was honestly farther than he'd gotten with most girls.

A little sad, but hey, it's the small victories.

Jaune checked the time on his scroll. He was supposed to be meeting up with Pyrrha on the roof about now, something he'd been looking forward to since the start of the day. He wanted to put Cinder's advice into practice as soon as he could. The girl certainly knew what she was doing, so it couldn't hurt to take her word for it and see where it got him.

As of recently, he found himself increasingly focused on training. He was finally starting to see real progress, and the light at the end of the tunnel was getting brighter and brighter. There was still a ton of work to do, but it didn't seem quite so hopeless now.

"Hey, Jaune!"

Jaune turned to look towards the direction of the voice, seeing Cinder walking quickly towards him. Huh. He was just thinking about her, too.

It was certainly strange how much they crossed paths, but he chalked that up to the fact that Beacon wasn't all that big a school, even with the exchange students there. Huntsman academies were rather exclusive.

"Hey, Cinder. Long time no see, huh?" Jaune chuckled at his own bad joke. "I feel like I see you more than my own teammates, and I live with them."

Cinder giggled and ran a hand through her hair. "Ah, well, it's a rather small school," she said, repeating his earlier thoughts. "Anyways, how are you?"

"I'm doing pretty good, actually. Just about to get some training in with my partner. How about you?"

"Oh, I'm doing just fine." Cinder took a step closer to him and put her hand on his arm, making him blush. "A lot better now that you're here."

Jaune let out a nervous laugh and broke eye contact.

There it was again. She was flirting with him, he supposed. It was more than likely she wasn't being serious, though, just joking around. Yang had done the same thing once or twice, although that had seemed much more tongue-in-cheek. Still though, as much as he would've liked to think someone like her was interested in him, he really doubted that.

He'd considered trying to flirt back a couple times when they were training together, but ultimately ended up deciding not to. He didn't want to come off as weird, especially if it turned out he was misinterpreting it all. Besides, he didn't even really know what to say in the first place.

"G-glad to hear you're doing good," he said, cursing his own awkwardness. "So, uh... what brings you around here?" Just because he didn't think too deep into her flirting doesn't mean that it

didn't make him nervous, something he was probably making very clear.

Seriously? "What brings you around here?" What am I even saying? Her dorm is probably just down the hall!

"Just exploring the campus is all. I saw you here and just couldn't pass up the opportunity," she said, taking another step towards him. There was maybe a foot of distance in between them.

Jaune froze up, his face getting more and more red. How was he even supposed to respond to that?! Luckily, she kept speaking without waiting for a response, saving him from having to.

"You know, I'm rather disappointed you didn't call me last night. I was really looking forward to that."

Oh right, that... He'd spent the better part of a half-hour trying to decide if he should actually follow through and dial her number, but chickened out on account of his social awkwardness. Luckily, she didn't seem to be genuinely upset with him.

"O-oh, sorry about that," he said, scratching the back of his neck. "I, uh..." He looked for something to say, but came up with nothing.

"Don't worry about it," she said, once again bailing him out. Her lips moved into a smirk as she brought her hand up to his cheek, threatening to shut his brain off completely. "Fortunately for you, I can think of a few ways you can make it up to me."

"Jaune? Are you ready for our training?"

Cinder took her hand off of his arm and stepped back away from him, turning to the source of the voice.

He hadn't even noticed Pyrrha there until she spoke up. Somehow, she'd managed to find both the best and worst timing possible.

Pyrrha looked past him at Cinder, frowning. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt your conversation." If he didn't know her as well as he did, he would've said she seemed angry at her. "Anyway," she said, turning back towards him, "If you're ready-"

"We weren't done talking." Cinder stared back at the other girl, her tone cold and unfriendly. "Why don't you allow us to finish, *then* you can do... whatever it is you two do," she said, narrowing her eyes.

Jaune looked between them, completely taken off-guard. Nora often told him how dense he was, but he wasn't so stupid that he couldn't detect the tension in the hallway. Why was she always telling him that, anyway?

"Excuse me?" Pyrrha sounded just as shocked as he was. "I... listen, I apologize for interjecting, but we are supposed to be training about now. Right, Jaune?" she said, turning to him.

Cinder opened her mouth to say something back, but Jaune spoke up before she could, putting an end to whatever was going on there.

"W- why don't we catch up later, alright?" he said, trying his best to diffuse the situation. "I'd love to talk, but you know how it is. Gotta stay on top of training, hah hah..." Despite his very convincing fake laugh, neither of the two girls seemed any less on-edge, with Cinder continuing to glare at Pyrrha while the latter shifted on her feet and avoided eye contact.

The former spoke to him without ever looking away Pyrrha. "If that's what you want, I suppose..."

Jaune cleared his throat. "Okay, then... You wanna go up to the roof now, Pyr?"

"Yes, let's do that."

"Alright, then." Jaune looked back towards Cinder. "Talk to you later?"

"Yes, we will," she responded assertively. The girl stood still and watched them leave until they were out of eyeshot.

He and his partner made their way towards the roof in a silence that Pyrrha only broke once they closed the door behind him.

"So... is that who you were training with yesterday?"

The question didn't need to be asked. Jaune was thinking the exact same thing.

"Yea. I honestly don't know why she seemed so upset," he said, sighing. "She was fine when we were talking right before, and then you came and... well, you know what happened."

"It was certainly strange." Pyrrha paused. "I mean, don't you think her behavior was a little... concerning?"

Jaune thought for a few seconds.

He supposed it was, at least a little bit. But even more than that it was just downright *weird*. She seemed really ticked off that Pyrrha had cut their conversation short, even if she had a valid reason to do so. Maybe she just had a short fuse? It was possible, but if that was the case he'd imagine that she would've gotten frustrated with him plenty of times during their training. Besides, that would have to be a *really* short fuse.

Maybe he should just not worry about it. He doubted Cinder would want him digging into her personal issues, and he didn't really want to piss her off. Seriously, she could *fight*.

"I suppose so. I don't know though, I guess I'd have to get to know her better before I assume anything."

Pyrrha sighed. "Maybe it'd be best if you just... avoided her?"

"I don't know, Pyr," he said with a frown. "Doesn't that seem a little mean?"

"I-" Pyrrha shook her head. "Nevermind."

Heat rushed to Cinder's face as she watched Jaune walk down the hallway with his partner, leaving her standing alone outside his dorm.

She was going to *murder* that slut! At the first opportunity, she would punish her for trying to separate them. What the hell did she think she was doing, interrupting them like that!? Why couldn't she just leave them alone!?

Yet somehow, Nikos cutting their conversation short wasn't even the worst part. No, that was what happened afterwards. Jaune, her sweet, beloved Jaune, had turned her away and left to go with that *skank* of a partner. She understood that he just wanted to stop an argument, but it still hurt.

A singular tear rolled down her cheek and dropped to the floor unnoticed by Cinder, who simply stared ahead where Jaune had left, clenching her fists. Her chest felt heavy as his words echoed in her head.

It was Nikos' fault. All she'd asked was for her to let them finish speaking, but that little whore just *had* to insist! If she'd just had the slightest bit of patience, this wouldn't have happened! Why couldn't she just have waited? Why was it so important to her that she had to pull Jaune aside right then and there?

Cinder's breathing got heavy. Suddenly, it made perfect sense. The first time in the library could've been excused as an accident - an unforgivable accident, but an accident nonetheless - but this was the second time she'd separated them.

She'd done it on *purpose* ! Nikos was trying to take him from her!

It had been a possibility before, but she really hated her because of how much time she spent around Jaune. Now, though, it was all but confirmed.

Cinder felt the half-maiden powers surge in her hands, begging to be released. She didn't really want to hold them back, either.

What made that bitch think she was worthy of him?! He was too good for her, *far* too good! She would make her regret thinking for even a *second* that she could have him!

She wanted so badly to march up to the roof and do just that, but unfortunately she just couldn't. At least, not yet, and not with Jaune there. If he were to see her do that, he would see her as some kind of monster. So as much as she didn't want to, she would have to sit patiently and await her chance. She wasn't exactly known for her patience, much the opposite in fact, but if it meant getting rid of Nikos then she was willing to do so.

Cinder practically stomped back down the hallway towards her dorm, still seething with rage.

As she walked, her mind once again went back to the conversation she'd had with Jaune, or more specifically, how he'd left her to run off with Nikos.

She'd tried to push back and keep him there with her, but that didn't work. It only made things worse. She saw the look on Jaune's face when he talked to her, and it was obvious that he had been uncomfortable. At least he didn't seem angry or upset with her, but still. It could very well come back to bite her. Especially now that she knew that Nikos was after him too, it would be a disaster to give him any reason to turn her down.

The whole thing only served to make her bad day much worse. She'd woken up upset and sleep-deprived, having stayed up almost the entire night staring at her scroll and waiting for Jaune to call her. It wouldn't have been all that bad if she'd gotten any opportunity to talk to him, but that hadn't happened either. His damn friends still just couldn't leave him alone!

Of course, she did eventually get some much needed alone-time with him, but Nikos just *had* to put a stop to that. Because Oum-forbid she actually find some happiness for once in her life, right? Nope, Pyrrha fucking Nikos just *had* to keep her away from Jaune, the *one* thing she'd ever really wanted, the *one* thing she'd spent years looking for!

Cinder clenched her fists, barely managing to resist punching a hole in the wall. She was back at the dorm now, but couldn't enter how she was. She needed to calm down first, adopt her usual calm demeanor, and walk without letting Emerald or Mercury know that something was wrong. Questions were the last thing she wanted from them.

Pushing the door open, she saw that Emerald and Mercury had listened to her orders and were waiting in the dorm room. The former took the time to look up at her, while the other simply stared down at his scroll, avoiding eye contact. He seemed to be doing that a lot recently.

"Mercury, Emerald," she said, closing the door again. "I trust you both have made progress on your respective tasks?"

"Of course, Cinder," Emerald said proudly. "I've acquainted myself with Ruby Rose, just as you requested. She doesn't seem to notice any holes in my story."

"Good." If the girl was expecting any more praise, she wasn't getting it. "And you, Mercury?" Cinder turned to the other person in the room. "I recall telling you to form a relationship with Jaune Arc of Team JNPR?"

Mercury looked up at her. "I... well, I'm still getting to that."

Cinder already knew he hadn't started. If there had been any chance to talk to him, she would've beaten him to it. Still, a simple reminder never hurt anyone.

"Why do you think I keep you around, Mercury?" she said. The boy was smart enough to keep his mouth shut. "I keep you around because you're useful. Now, you're only useful because you do what I say and when I say it." Cinder glared at him for a few seconds before continuing. "Now, if you want to stick around, I suggest you *stay* useful."

Mercury tried to defend himself, but was quickly interrupted. "I've *tried*- "

"You will begin tonight, or you can expect consequences," she snapped out. "Believe me, Mercury, you don't want to know I have in store for you if you fail me."

Cinder scowled at him for a few seconds before slamming the door shut again. Threatening him didn't make her feel any better. Clearly, she needed a better method of letting out her frustration. Preferably, something more violent.

The Emerald Forest was riddled with grimm, or so she'd heard. Right outside Beacon, too. The "creatures of darkness" were really the perfect targets for blowing off some steam, being both abundant and fragile to anyone who knew their weak spots. Cinder could remember entire days spent slaughtering them around Evermore after Watts had said something or another, or even just for the hell of it.

The hallways were mostly empty as she walked towards the elevator, as to be expected late in the evening. Although even if someone was there, she probably wouldn't have noticed. Her mind was on other things.

As usual, those "other things" just so happened to revolve around Jaune.

She needed to make him hers before Nikos could. Plain and simple. His partner was competition, competition that slept in the same room

as him and trained with him five days a week. That made her dangerous.

Her one saving grace was that the girl seemed too nervous to act. The school year had started months ago, and yet she still hadn't made a move on him. Still though, no way was she going to risk losing him. She needed to get her feelings across to him, and beat that *skank* to it.

Her face heated back up again as she remembered how his partner had tried forcing him away from her.

What, she thinks she can control him now?! Govern where he goes and who he speaks to!? He deserves so much better than that!

Nikos couldn't make him happy, not like Cinder could. She would do anything, *anything* just to see him smile. Nikos, though? The idea that she could give him *any* sort of pleasure would have had her laughing her ass off if it didn't make her want to throw up.

He needs me to be there for him. I have to keep him safe from her and-

"Hey, you lost or something?"

Her train of thought was interrupted by an unfamiliar voice that called out to her just before she could get into the elevator. She turned towards the source and her scowl only got worse. It was the same ginger boy that had been staring at her in the library.

"Can't blame you. It is a big campus, after all. Name's Cardin. Why don't I show you around?" he said, leaning against the wall and smirking at her. Everything about him screamed of arrogance.

"I'd like nothing less," she bit back. Her response was so immediate that the boy could hardly even finish his sentence. "Unless you want to have a problem, I suggest you leave me alone and mind your own business." If her words weren't hostile, her tone definitely was.

"Sheesh, you've had a rough day, huh? I think I can help with that. How about you come with me back to my dorm?" Apparently, he didn't get the message. That only served to irritate her further.

"Are you deaf, or just an idiot!?" Cinder was all but yelling at him. "I believe I said loud and clear that I don't want to talk to you. Leave me alone."

She turned back around and made to get into the elevator, but stopped in her tracks when she heard him speak up again. "Yea, whatever. I just saw you talking to Jaune the other day in the library and felt bad that you had to settle for that loser."

Cinder froze, her eyes widening with rage. Time seemed to slow down as she whipped around to look at the pathetic bastard that *dared* to speak a word against her sweet Jaune. The boy had his back turned to her and had already begun to walk in the other direction. If he was expecting to get away with that, he was dead wrong.

"Say that again!" The boy looked back and stared at her with shock for a few seconds. "I said," Cinder took a few steps closer to him, "Say. That. Again."

Cardin got over his confusion and glared back, evening moving closer in a foolish attempt to intimidate her. "I *said*, I felt bad that you-" Whatever he was about to say was interrupted by a blade of obsidian glass pressing against his neck.

She didn't even care about keeping her cover. All she could think about was making sure this son of a bitch got what he deserved. As far as Cinder was concerned, she would be more than justified in slitting his throat and letting him bleed out.

"Well? Go on," she hissed, "I'm just *dying* to hear what you were about to tell me. Or maybe you just lost your train of thought?"

He took a step back only for Cinder to close the distance again, still holding Midnight up against the side of his neck, right under his jaw. "Y-yea, that's it. I lost my train of thought. I don't even remember what I was about to say." Sweat began to drip down his forehead. Good. She wanted him to fear her.

"Wow, you *are* dumb. Well, how about I help you out?" Cinder pressed harder against his neck, enough so that it would have drawn blood if he didn't have aura. "I believe you were saying that you felt *bad* for me. Now why, exactly, is that?"

"H-hey, I didn't mean anything by it. I was just kidding around," he said, doing a terrible job of faking an amused smile. "Just a joke." She pressed harder. "I-I'm sorry, alright!?! I shouldn't have said that!"

Cinder stared him in the eyes for a few seconds, contemplating her next action.

His fake apology only made her want to kill him even more. His aura meant it wouldn't be as simple as dragging the blade across his jugular, but she was still more than confident she could manage. It wasn't a question of whether or not she could do it, but rather if she could get away with it.

Beacon would obviously launch a thorough investigation, which was likely already happening with her break-in from a few months ago. Her powers would leave little evidence behind, but if they did manage to catch her...

It wasn't so much the school she was worried about, but Jaune. Or rather, what he would think of her if he found out that she'd killed someone, even if they'd deserved it. She wasn't ready to risk her relationship with Jaune, not for this and not for anything.

"Fine," she said, taking the blade off of his neck. "I'll let you go, but if you so much as look my way again, I *will* make you regret it." There was nothing hypothetical about it. It was a promise, not a threat,

something the boy actually managed to catch onto, surprisingly enough.

"Right, of course," he said, breaking eye contact.

"Good." Cinder finally turned around and got into the elevator, punching in the ground level button.

The danger of the Emerald Forest was clearly not exaggerated. Cinder had never seen so many grimm in one place, at least not outside of Evernight. Obviously, they were attracted by her negativity, but they still had to be in the area to detect her in the first place.

A lifetime spent training and half the maiden powers meant she had no problem cutting them down, but she doubted a first-year huntsman in training could do the same. A team of four? Maybe, but not easily.

If anything, she was glad there were so many. It gave her an outlet for her temper, something she desperately needed at the moment. Almost an hour had passed since she ran into the Cardin boy in the hallway, but she'd hardly calmed down.

He had officially made himself a target. Cinder was *not* about to let him get away with bad-mouthing her Jaune like that.

He has some nerve, slandering him like that! I'm going to make his life hell!

Only a small part of her mind was focused on fighting. Her body carried out the movements almost robotically, dodging, slashing, and torching the grimm on its own. It was practically instincts at this point. She found weak points and ripped into them without even thinking.

A stab wound to the stomach from Midnight killed an ursa.

Who the hell does he think he is?! Speaking down on Jaune like that!

A burst of fire took out a beowulf.

And Nikos, too! Does she think she can have him just because she's his partner? Because of her worthless titles!?

Cinder turned and saw a death stalker poised to strike. For the first time in a while, she was fully aware of her surroundings.

She braced herself, waiting for the creature to charge at her, but it stayed completely still. Looking around, she saw that all the other grimm were doing the same, grouping around the small clearing she found herself in. It would have certainly been a strange sight for nearly anyone else, but Cinder had seen this many times before.

The queen was here. Maybe not in person, but she was present in some other form. Salem had spent thousands of years honing her magic and didn't hesitate to use it when she thought she needed to, even on members of her own inner circle. She rarely did, though, so if she was using it now to contact her, then it was undoubtedly important.

Cinder did her best to compose herself and stood still, waiting for Salem to reveal herself.

" *Cinder...* " A cold breeze swept through the trees. The voice sounded distant, but powerful nonetheless. It came from all around, almost as if the forest itself was calling to her.

"Cinder." Turning around, she saw the figure of Salem towering above her. She could see right through her body, but that didn't make her any less intimidating. "What is it that you plan to accomplish out here in the forest? Have you forgotten about our plans, or do you believe you've found something more worth your time?"

"Master." Cinder kneeled in front of her. "I've hardly been here for long. I assure you, I have spent more than enough time developing my plans."

Salem saw right through her lie. "As much time as you've spent chasing after the boy?"

Cinder looked up at her in surprise. "I have been... pursuing some personal interests, yes, but believe me, that has no effect on what happens to Beacon."

"Is that so?" Salem looked down on her with a scowl. "Listen to me, Cinder. Beacon *will* fall, and you will make sure of that. Perhaps I might give you permission to go after the boy if you succeed, but until then, your focus is needed elsewhere."

"My queen!" she said, jumping up. "I really don't think it is unreasonable that I start to pursue him before the Vytal festival. I am more than capable of doing both."

"If I recall, you are also capable of waiting, however much you dislike it. Patience has gotten you this far, has it not?"

"It has," she responded through gritted teeth, "but you must understand that I can't miss my chance to-"

"I do not care for your excuses," Salem snapped at her. "You will take the rest of the maiden powers or you will suffer the consequences." The grimm around them started growling, circling around the clearing. "I'm sure Tyrian would be more than happy to pay a visit to a certain Jaune Arc, but I would simply hate for that to be necessary. Would you not agree?"

W- what? She... she can't possibly mean...

Cinder drew in a hitched breath and looked up at her. "M-my queen! You can't... you can't really be *serious*?" The look on Salem's face gave her an answer, and it wasn't the one she wanted. For a second, she didn't even believe it. "You can't do that! He has nothing to do with any of this!"

"It is in your hands. Succeed, and you have no reason to worry about him." Salem began to disappear, her projection slowly fading away into a cloud of fog.

"You can't! You *can't!* " she screamed, collapsing back onto her knees. Salem was already gone, and her grimm started dispersing through the trees, having somehow been ordered to do so by their master. Cinder slammed her fist into the dirt.

Was this what she got for all her efforts? After all she'd done for Salem, *this* was how she was rewarded!? Her nails dug into her palms as the image of Jaune, bleeding out on the ground under Tyrian Callows, came into her mind. Her breathing got unsteady.

No, that wouldn't happen. She wouldn't let it happen. She was going to make him hers, no matter what Salem had told her, and protect him. Whether it be from Tyrian, Nikos, or anyone else, she would do whatever it took to make sure nobody harmed him.

"I won't let anything happen to you, Jaune," she said to herself. "I'm going to keep you safe. No one's going to hurt you, I promise."

Mercury opened the door to the locker room, where he'd seen Jaune enter just a few seconds earlier.

Talking to this guy was practically the last way he wanted to spend his time. He was used to doing Cinder's dirty work at this point, but when it came to her love life he'd much prefer to be left out of it. He'd tried to just ignore his boss' instructions and avoid talking to him, but it hadn't taken long for her to get impatient.

Actually, "impatient" was underselling it. She had been *livid* with him.

So here he was, following him through the hallway and looking for an opportunity to talk to him. It wasn't the first time he'd ever stalked someone before, but knowing exactly why he was doing it this time

made it feel a lot weirder. Helping Cinder hook up with some student was not what he wanted to be doing at Beacon.

Mercury quickly scanned his surroundings, spotting a lanky, blonde teen on the other side of the room. Great. Now all he needed to do was exchange a few words and he could be on his way.

The boy didn't even seem to notice him approaching until he was practically right behind him. He was lucky Cinder wanted to protect him so much, because it would honestly be a miracle if he lasted even a day as a huntsman with that little awareness.

"Hey, you know if I can find an empty locker somewhere around here?"

Jaune whipped around, apparently startled by Mercury's completely unnoticeable appearance. Seriously, *this* was Cinder's boytoy?

"H-huh? Oh, yea. They should have some extra over there," he said, pointing down the hallway. "Most of the ones closer to the door are already taken, but you shouldn't have any real trouble getting one if you look farther in."

"Thanks, bro." An idea popped into his mind, making him smirk. Maybe if he could just get him to say something nice about Cinder, he could report that back to her and she would be too happy to bother him for a few days. "Say, I think I recognize you from somewhere..."

"Oh," Jaune scratched the back of his neck, "well-"

Mercury snapped his fingers, interrupting him. "I remember now! Pretty sure I've seen you hanging around one of my teammates."

"Really?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "Who's your teammate?"

"Her name's Cinder Fall. You know her?"

"Oh, yea," he said, chuckling. "Not too well, but we've hung out a couple times."

Mercury extended a hand, trying to make him as comfortable as possible. "I'm Mercury, by the way."

"I'm Jaune," he said, taking his hand and shaking it. "Nice to meet you, Mercury."

"You too. So, about Cinder..."

"Y-yea? What about her?" Just mentioning her seemed to make him nervous. Seriously, what was she doing to the poor guy?

Nevermind. He really didn't want to know.

"Well, what do you think about her?"

"O-oh, well..." Jaune's face became a light shade of red. "She seems nice... a little weird, maybe, but pretty. I-" The boy froze, having realized his mistake just a second too late. "Err... pretty nice, I mean," he stammered out. "She seems pretty nice."

"Uh huh." Mercury rolled his eyes. "I'm sure that's exactly what you meant."

"I-it is! I just misspoke is all," he said, still trying to save face.

"Right, dude. I'm going to go find an empty locker now."

Mercury walked away, finally putting an end to the conversation. He'd gotten all the information he needed, and really didn't feel like continuing it. Hell, it was just as awkward for him as it was for Jaune.

Chapter 7

Cinder stared at the clock mounted on Peter Port's wall, tapping a finger against the table. She'd long since drowned out the professor's lecture, having found it to be just as uninteresting as it was unimportant. Apparently, she wasn't the only one. Only a few students seemed to be paying any level of attention to the class.

None of them had the textbook they'd been told to bring to the class, either, but that was clearly paying off considering the professor didn't seem to even know that it existed. She only bothered getting one from the library because she didn't want to risk seeming lazy or undedicated in front of Jaune.

To her left, Mercury was leaning back in his chair and snoring furiously, much to the annoyance of Emerald. Cinder could hardly care less, being far too busy counting down the seconds until the bell rang and Port dismissed his students. She had important business to attend to, and very little time to waste.

Her Jaune needed her. She had to protect him, keep him safe from Salem and whatever she had in mind for him if Cinder betrayed her. The Fall of Beacon would be a problem, too. While it would allow her to take the maiden powers, it was even more important that she make sure Jaune would go unharmed. That was months away, though, so until then, she would focus on getting close to him.

Cinder looked behind her, fixing her gaze on her beloved. Unfortunately, she hadn't been able to get a spot behind him, so she couldn't spend the entire class looking at him and had to get by on occasional glances. Hence why she was so impatient to leave.

Jaune lay slumped over the table, resting his head in his arms, his body moving up and down ever so subtly with his breath. The motion hypnotized her.

Turning back around, Cinder closed her eyes and smiled as she thought back to her conversation with Mercury, when he'd told her that her beloved had called her pretty. *Pretty!* She almost didn't believe him at first. It just seemed too good to be true. Everything was coming together, and she was so close to finally having him! All she needed was a little more time with him, and once she got that, he was as good as hers.

Even now, just thinking about it made her heart flutter.

It was all perfectly planned out. Cinder would approach him sometime after class and invite him to accompany her into town, where she'd buy him something nice and ask him out on an official date. The only hard part would be waiting.

She didn't even fear a rejection. Not because one wouldn't hurt - of course it would - but even his "yes" was all but practically guaranteed at this point. What reason did he have to turn her down? She'd made a good first impression, offered to help him, and on top of that he found her attractive.

He already thinks I'm beautiful, all that's left now is to show that I can treat him right, and then we can finally be together!

Cinder sighed and leaned against the table, still grinning to herself. She wondered what it was that he liked about her. Was it her body? Her face? Her clear skin? Whatever the case, all that time she put into her appearance had more than paid off.

Hell, she could just ask him. She'd love to hear the words directly from her husband-to-be, and besides, that had to be a hint he couldn't ignore, right?

Actually, he'd brushed off much more obvious advances...

Oh well, she wouldn't have to worry about that once they were dating anyway. Besides, his density might actually end up proving to be a

good thing later on if that damn partner of his tried something before she could ask him out.

That was just yet another reason for her haste in pursuing him. She was *not* about to sit back and give that little slut an opportunity to take him from her, even if she doubted Nikos would end up taking it. But that was the difference between them, wasn't it?

Cinder was a woman of action. She wanted Jaune, and so she'd go after him. Nikos was clearly being too passive if she hadn't taken him by now, and that was exactly why she would never get the chance.

Her smile widened as she thought about what she and Jaune's relationship would do to his partner, how hurt the girl would be when she realized that someone else had taken him. It would be one of the many, many benefits of having him all to herself. Certainly far from the best part, but something she looked forward to seeing nonetheless.

Oh, and no need to worry about Jaune getting concerned for her, either. He'd be far too busy spending time with his beautiful new girlfriend to pay attention to his teammates.

Yes, they'd be going out together plenty. Once or twice every day if they could, but Cinder supposed she could settle for five to six times a week if Jaune didn't have that kind of time. She didn't want to exhaust him, afterall.

She would have to start planning out their first week or so together soon to make sure everything went smoothly. Anything less than perfection for her beloved simply wouldn't cut it. It had to be enough to make him fall in love, enough to make him think about her as much as she did him.

You'll love me soon, Jaune. I know you will.

Jaune jolted awake at the sound of the bell. The noise of dozens of other students getting out of their seats and talking to their teammates immediately made his head throb.

"-over at the dorm?"

Jaune rubbed his eyes and turned to look at Pyrrha, his vision finally focusing. He hadn't even realized she was trying to talk to him.

"H-huh?"

His partner just smiled at him, probably used to his antics by now. "I was just asking if you would like to get some rest back at our dorm before our training tonight. It seems like you really need it."

Pyrrha certainly made a tempting offer, but it was probably best that he move around for a bit. From his experience, sitting back down again would likely just put him right back to sleep, not that he was always napping in class or anything. Sure, maybe he dozed off a little more than the average person, but who didn't during Professor Port's class?

"Thanks, but I gotta wake myself up. Have to... y'know... get my blood pumping and everything," Jaune said, putting his head back down on the table.

Pyrrha responded with an amused smile. "I believe that would work better if you stayed conscious," she said, helping him stand up out of his chair. "Come on, you need to lay down. In a bed this time."

"Yea, yea," he mumbled.

The four of them began walking back to their dorm, with Nora going on yet another one of her tangents. Some story about a rubber duck this time? He honestly wasn't sure. At some point, he'd stopped paying his full attention to her when she began ranting like that.

"I'm gonna run to the bathroom real quick," Jaune said, speaking over Nora. "I'll catch up with you guys back at the dorm. Shouldn't take too long."

Pyrrha looked at him and smiled. "Alright, just don't take too long, okay?"

"Course not, Pyr," he said, grinning at her.

Jaune turned the corner, splitting off from the rest of his team. The hallway was mostly empty aside from a few other people, with most students going the other way towards their dorm rooms. He appreciated the silence after listening to Nora's tirade for the past few minutes. It wasn't that he found her annoying, just that she could be a little much sometimes, especially after a long day of classes.

That being said, he wouldn't trade her for anyone. She was a great friend and a great teammate, someone he felt he could always rely on. He thought the same of Pyrrha and Ren, too. Their team almost felt like family.

Hell, Pyrrha had saved his life back during initiation, and they'd only even talked to each other all of one time at that point. What else could you really ask for from a partner?

Jaune swung the bathroom door open and headed straight for the sink, his footsteps echoing softly against the floor. Turning the faucet on, he put his hands under the cold water and brought it up against his face, leaning over the basin with his eyes shut as he waited for the shock to go away. He sat there for a few seconds before finally drying his face off, finally having managed to wake himself up.

His reflection in the mirror stared back at him with small bags under its eyes. He hadn't gotten much sleep the night before, having forgotten about some assignments and remembering them after settling in for the night.

Running his hands through his hair and straightening his clothes out, he did his best to try and make himself presentable before he turned around and left. Even if he felt like collapsing, he didn't want to look like he was about to.

Jaune walked out the bathroom and started down the hall, but stopped when he heard his name.

"Funny seeing you here, Jaune."

Turning around, he saw Cinder making her way towards him, carrying a heavy textbook under her arm. Poor girl must've actually believed Port when he said to bring that.

"Oh, hey Cinder. I'm surprised you managed to get through one of Port's lectures," he joked. "I feel like I get a year older everytime I walk into his classroom."

It wasn't really all that funny, but it made Cinder laugh. "It was the same for me," she said with a smile. "I've enjoyed Beacon thus far, but I can't say I have too much praise for the professors here. I can't blame you for catching up on some rest during that last class."

Jaune's face turned a light shade of red. "I don't *usually* do that," he quickly replied. "I just, ah, didn't get much sleep last night is all."

"Why's that? Up late thinking of me?" Jaune's blush deepened, making her smirk. "Don't worry, I understand. Next time, why don't you text me and I'll stop by your dorm?"

"I- h-huh?" he sputtered. As usual, he couldn't find any way to respond to her.

Cinder giggled. "Ah, I'm just teasing you. Wouldn't want to wake up the rest of your team, afterall." Jaune just stared at her with his mouth open, his mind shutting off completely. "Anyways, there is actually something I'd like to ask you. You grew up in Vale, correct?"

"Oh, yea, out in the countryside," he said, blinking in surprise. He didn't remember ever telling her that, but he supposed he probably let it slip when they were training together or something. "Why do you ask?"

"I wanted to know if you would like to accompany me into the city this weekend. Have you ever been?"

Something about the way she was looking at him made it hard to keep eye contact.

"Well, I've gone on a few vacations there when I was younger, but it's been a while."

In all honesty, the offer confused him. The girl clearly wanted to be friends with him, but he just couldn't put his finger on the reason for that. Still, he was not one to look the gift horse in the mouth, and *certainly* not the type to turn down a pretty girl who wanted to hang out, partly because that was an opportunity that didn't arise often for him.

"I'd be happy to go out with you, though." His stomach jumped. Cinder opened her mouth to speak, but luckily he managed to fix his mistake before she could say anything. "Go out to the city, I mean! As friends! Not, like, on a *date* or anything, haha..."

Phew. Thank the gods he managed to set the record straight on *that*

"Right, yes... of course." Cinder cleared her throat. "My schedule is mostly free, so whatever day you'd like to go will work for me."

"A-alright," he said, still a bit shaken up by his earlier slip-up. "I don't think I have anything going on Saturday, so I'd love to meet up pretty much anytime then. What's most convenient for you?"

Cinder beamed at his response. "Great! Why don't I come by your room at ten and we can walk over to the bullheads together?"

"Sounds like a plan. I'll text you if anything changes, but that should work for me." Jaune took out his scroll to check the time. He wasn't exactly dying to end the conversation, but his team was probably expecting him back soon. "It's probably time I got back to my dorm, told my friends I wouldn't take too long and I don't want to make anyone worry about me. So, ten o'clock Saturday?"

"I look forward to it," she said, winking at him. "Don't keep me waiting too long, now."

"Yea, 'course not," he responded, scratching the back of his neck with a nervous smile. "See you around."

Jaune walked down the hall, grinning to himself.

Well, that certainly could have gone worse. I was kind of worried she'd get scared off by that "go out with me" thing, but I guess she didn't mind.

Turning around the corner, he froze almost immediately when he saw someone else standing there in the middle of the hallway.

Oh Oum...

There, only a few feet from him, was Yang Xiao Long, the Queen of Teasing. The girl stared him in the eyes, grinning ear to ear like a Cheshire cat. Jaune groaned and covered his face with his hand.

While he and the other blonde from Team RWBY weren't very close, that would absolutely *not* stop her from poking fun at him. If she had listened in on his conversation with Cinder, he was going to hear about it for who knows how long.

Okay, don't panic, there's a chance she just got here. She might not have even heard any of that.

"Sooo... Vomit Boy's got a date, huh?"

Nope. She'd heard it, alright. For the foreseeable future, he was doomed. He could already see the countless jokes made at the lunch table, in between classes, during every interaction the two of them had... He was done for.

"I must say, I am impressed. I was starting to think you didn't have it in you, but here you are," she said, resting her hands on her hips.

"It's not a date!" Jaune lowered his voice. "We're just... hanging out, is all."

Yang raised an eyebrow. "I don't know, Jaune, going out into the city together? Just the two of you? Sounds like she just asked you out on a date to me."

"Yang, I'm sure-"

"Come on, Vomit Boy," she said, interrupting him. "If anything, you should be proud about a hot girl like that asking you out! Seriously, huge update from Weiss-Cream."

Jaune dragged his hand down his face, taking a deep breath to avoid dying of embarrassment. "Listen, I *really* doubt she thinks about me like that. We only met a few days ago, and I can't imagine anyone would fall for me that quickly."

"Well, clearly your new girlfriend has if she's already asking you out," Yang said. "What's her name, anyway?"

"Cind-" Jaune stopped himself when he saw her smile widen and realized what he'd said. "She is *not* my girlfriend!"

Yang laughed. "Whatever you say, man. I can't *wait* to tell everyone about this."

Jaune's eyes widened in horror. "Everyone?! Who's *everyone*?! "

"Oh, don't worry, just the rest of my team and probably Nora." Yang playfully punched his shoulder. "Hey, they'll be happy for you,

especially after you've been going after Wiess for so long! You've moved on and found yourself a beautiful new girlfriend, nothing to be embarrassed about."

"I told you she isn't my girlfriend!"

"Just remember to stay pure and all that stuff, at least until you've been dating a little longer," she said, making Jaune's face turn a dark shade of red. That only seemed to encourage her. "Go too far and you might regret it, so just keep things slow and steady until you're ready to get married."

Jaune groaned. This was going to be a long week...

Pyrrha stretched her hand out to her partner, helping him up off the floor. The shattered moon hung above them in the night sky, illuminating the roof of Beacon enough for them to have their nightly session.

"You've been doing quite well, Jaune. Keep it up and you'll be a very capable huntsman one day," she said, smiling at him.

"Thanks, Pyr." Doubled over, Jaune wiped the sweat off his brow and looked up at her. "I've still got a long way to go, though, but seriously, thank you. I wouldn't be here without your help."

"Don't put yourself down." Pyrrha blushed and put her weapon away, with Jaune following her example and placing Crocea Mors back into its sheath. "You are the one putting in the work, afterall."

"Well sure, I may be the one practicing, but I'm just following advice other people have given me," he said, chuckling.

As usual, Jaune deflected her compliments and praised everyone else for all the effort he put in. She'd break that habit one day.

"Nonsense," she replied sternly. "I only taught you the basics, you're making progress on your own. Besides, everyone learns from someone." Pyrrha smiled at him. "Do you think I've figured this all out on my own?"

Jaune laughed. "Actually, part of me kind of wonders if you did."

Pyrrha playfully rolled her eyes. "The point is, other people teaching you doesn't detract from your accomplishments in the slightest."

"Come on, you're being modest! Besides, Cinder's been helping me out too, so I really can't take that much credit."

"Oh, right... Cinder." Her smile dropped. It seemed like the girl was still set on getting close to him. She'd foolishly hoped that she would realize that Pyrrha wasn't having it after their short conversation and just give up and move on. Apparently, that wasn't the case. "Is she... nice to you?"

"Y-yea, she's great." Jaune scratched the back of his neck and averted his eyes. "Why do you ask?"

Pyrrha bit down on her thumbnail. The topic clearly made him nervous, or at least a bit embarrassed. Jaune could be awkward, sure, but he probably wouldn't act like that if there wasn't something a little deeper going on between them. What if she'd tried something on him?

She didn't get angry very easily, but if this girl was trying to lead her partner on...

"Just making sure, is all." Pyrrha shifted on her feet. "So about Cinder... has she asked about me at all?"

Jaune looked puzzled at the question. "She asked if we were dating the other day, but I told her we're just close friends. That's about it, though."

Alarm bells went off in her head, and not only because she'd just been best-friend zoned. Why was Cinder looking into his relationships? If she was trying to date Jaune to get close to Pyrrha or get some kind of information on her, she would absolutely have to put a stop to that. She couldn't stand by and watch that happen.

He didn't deserve to have his heart broken like that. He deserved someone who could treat him right, who wouldn't trick him or use him, someone who respected and cared about him.

Pyrrha nodded, trying her best to not show that anything had bothered her. She needed to know more. "So she was asking about your dating life?"

Much to her surprise, Jaune almost immediately caught on to what she was implying. She liked him both as a person and a partner, but even she had to admit that he could have some serious trouble reading in between the lines. "I guess, yea, b-but it isn't anything like that!" he said. "I'm sure she was just trying to make conversation."

"You don't think she's interested in you, then?"

"Oum no," he said with a chuckle. "Why would she want that with someone like me?"

Pyrrha looked at him with sympathy. "I thought we talked about this?"

"Right, right, self-esteem and all that stuff," Jaune said, looking down at his feet. "I'm just saying, I really can't see her thinking about me in that way." That answer should've reassured her, but like she said, *serious* troubles reading in between the lines.

"It's not a bad thing to recognize your faults, but it can get to a point where you can't see the good in yourself," she said, deciding to move on from the previous topic. "I'm sure there's plenty of girls who would be happy to have you."

"Thanks, Pyr. I appreciate that."

"Hey, Jaune." Pyrrha looked at him, but he turned away from her gaze. "I mean that, you know. Not everything works out, but that doesn't mean you should give up."

Jaune frowned. "What do you mean?"

I'm talking about Weiss, you idiot!

Pyrrha couldn't help but be bothered by his infatuation for the girl. Part of it was just her jealousy, but she also wished that if he was going to fall for someone else, it would at least be someone who was nice to him. Weiss clearly could not be, and she did not like that at all.

It wasn't that she had anything against her per se, just that she wondered how someone could be so *prissy* yet so *rude* at the same time.

Or maybe all of it was jealousy. Pyrrha didn't have such a high image of herself that she couldn't realize that she felt that way. She hated the feeling. It seemed like such an immature thing, but for the life of her she couldn't get rid of it or pretend it wasn't there. So perhaps Weiss didn't really deserve her ire.

... I still don't like her.

"Well, some things just aren't meant to be, and sometimes we just have to move on and find something else." Pyrrha put her hand on his shoulder. "It can hurt, but there are times when it's best for us."

"Thanks for the advice. I don't know what I would do without you," he said, looking over at her and half-smiling.

Pyrrha grinned. "Probably sleep."

Jaune laughed, sweat coming off his brow. Not that she noticed or anything. "Yea, probably."

AN:

Sorry for the long update times, and thank you all for your patience. I've had to put school work over writing, and oh boy have I had a lot of that. I also have other hobbies that take up a good deal of my time, and on top of that I got sick for a while and just didn't have the energy to write.

Anyways, going forward I'm going to prioritize writing as much as I can because I know a month plus between chapters is kind of irritating as a reader. I do have finals coming up very soon, but those will be over with in about two weeks or so and then I'll have much more time to put words down.

Also know that I'm not going to abandon this. If I take a while to update like I have been, it's because I have other stuff going on but am still working when I can, so rest assured knowing tragedy has been avoided. Thanks again for all your patience.

Chapter 8

Cinder strolled down the sidewalk, smiling to herself as she followed her beloved Jaune across the campus as he walked to class, trailing only a hundred feet or so behind him. The Autumn background, complete with yellow and orange leaves covering the ground, made him look straight out of a painting.

She couldn't believe how lucky she was. To meet him at the Glass Unicorn, find him at Beacon, become friends with him... All of that had seemed almost impossible not five months ago, and yet here she was, this close to having a date with him.

And to think I almost gave up...

Thank the gods she didn't. She'd been weak back then, torn apart by emotions she didn't know how to handle. A large part of her had resented her love, thinking that they would never find each other again, that the feeling would only lead to heartbreak and a lifetime of longing for something that just couldn't happen.

Thinking about it made her want to throw up out of shame.

No use dwelling on it now. That's all in the past, and right now I have a date to plan.

Their arrangement hadn't once left her mind since they'd talked to each other the day before. They were finally going to have some real private time together outside the school, and she could show him just how amazing she was.

Buying him a gift couldn't hurt, and she had enough money to get him whatever he wanted. She'd set aside almost all the lien she'd made over the last few years to ensure that she would be able to provide for him in their future together, and that was no small amount. Whoever said that crime doesn't pay had lied.

Whatever she bought had to be good, though. Even more so now, she had to really impress him and make him interested. He'd been pretty adamant to that friend of his that what they were doing was not, in fact, a date and that they were just friends spending time together. At the time, hearing that was gut wrenching. Eventually, though, after she'd shed a few tears, she realized her foolishness.

He hadn't rejected her. Nor hadn't he said that he didn't want her, just that they weren't together, that's all. Cinder hadn't technically asked him on a date yet, so how would it then make sense to get so distressed over being turned down when such a thing didn't actually happen? He would still be hers, so what was the matter?

Seeing Jaune about to enter the building, Cinder quickened her pace. Now was her chance.

It had already started to become routine. She would follow him, look for an opportunity to initiate conversation, and pounce once she got it, and although she'd only done it for a few days now, it felt like the most important part of her schedule.

"You certainly seem to be in a hurry," she said, having caught up to him just before he could open the door. "Off to class, I presume?"

Jaune briefly turned to her, a look of surprise apparent on his face. "Oh, hey, Cinder. I've got Professor Goodwitch's class right about now, and I'm about to be late. I'll catch up with you later."

He tried to push the door open, but she stopped him before he could. "Don't stress about it too much," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder. "I doubt you'll get in much trouble."

Jaune looked over at her, flashing her that adorable nervous smile that had her hanging on to his every word. "Trust me, I'd rather not go, but Goodwitch is kind of known for getting people in trouble. And you know how much I have to work on my fighting."

Cinder looked deep into his eyes. "Don't, then."

Jaune frowned in confusion. "What?"

"You said you don't want to go to class," she said, seeing an opening. "So don't." Searching for a response, he opened his mouth to speak but couldn't come up with anything, allowing her to keep talking instead. "She likely won't notice we're missing in the first place unless we show up late, anyway. I can't imagine Goodwitch checks to see all her students show up to every class."

"Well, I guess she doesn't, but still..." Jaune shifted on his feet. "She might call me up to fight, and my team will wonder where I am."

Cinder's eyebrow twitched. Somehow, everything went back to his team. They practically monopolized him. He spent all his time with them, sitting by them in class and in the lunchroom, training with them, and whatever else you could think of, he did with them. It made it hard to get the time she desperately needed with him. She had to find a way to break off those friendships, or at least weaken them to the point where they didn't see each other so much. All he needed was her.

"If her class is as bad as I'm told it is, I'm sure your team will understand," she said, getting in between him and the door.

Jaune seemed to consider it for a few seconds. "Sure, they might understand, but I don't think they'll be happy about it, and I really can't afford to skip out on this. For my own sake."

So that's what it was about. He was just worried about what his team would think about him, that's why he hesitated to go with her. Cinder had to resist the urge to clench her fists together.

They didn't deserve so much of his thought. If he knew how much better than them he really was, he wouldn't care about their opinion. She planned to show him just how far above them he stood, then he could live without worrying about what other, less valuable people would think of him.

"You put in seven days a week of extra practice, if I recall correctly. Although I must say I do admire your dedication, I doubt missing one class will hold you back all that much. Besides," she said, "I can't imagine your team will think less of you for it."

"Still... I don't want to miss out on anything that'll help me improve."

"Don't worry." Cinder locked her arm into his and dragged him away from the door, making him cry out in surprise. "We can make it up with some additional training next time we practice together. Now, why don't you walk me around the campus?"

Jaune sighed. "I *do* need to go to class, you know."

Cinder rolled her eyes and smiled. "Yes, but wouldn't you rather spend some time with me? Besides, Goodwitch can't get mad at you for skipping out to run off with a beautiful girl like me," she joked, winking at him.

"You clearly haven't met this woman," he said, looking around as if he was worried the professor would come out from around the corner at any moment. "Seriously, my team's going to worry about me if I'm gone too long."

"Surely they know you're capable of looking after yourself." Cinder noticed that he was walking alongside her now without having to be dragged along, making her heart race. "And you aren't exactly making much of an effort to go against me, either."

"Hey, it gives me an excuse to miss class, and it's not like I'm strong enough to stop you even if I were to try putting up a fight."

The comment just served as an oh-so tempting reminder that if she wanted to, she could just take him. The risk of hurting him was the only reason she hadn't done so already.

Unless he was into that sort of thing. Cinder certainly would not mind playing into that fantasy if he wanted her too.

"Not that you ever *would* try. I know you can't resist me," she said, slightly tightening her grip around his arm. "Afterall, you did call me pretty."

Jaune froze up, his face becoming a light shade of red. "H-huh?"

Cinder looked him in the eyes and smirked. "There's no need to be embarrassed. My teammate told me. In fact, I'm actually really flattered that you think that, although I wish you'd have told me yourself."

"Oh," he replied, looking at his feet. "Well, I do think that." He spoke hesitantly, as if unsure of how she would respond. If only he knew what kind of effect that remark really had on her.

She felt her breath being taken away, her heartbeat pounding in her ears. Her soul seemed to leave her body for a second, taken to a higher place by those four simple words. They were awkward, sure, but they meant everything to her. It was honestly a miracle that she didn't collapse on the spot with how weak her knees were.

"I- I-" Cinder looked for anything to say, but nothing was there, nothing to describe how amazing that made her feel. Her mouth just hung agape. She stared at him, enamored, and tried to catch his eye again, but he looked over to the side to hide his embarrassment.

"I really appreciate that," she said. He turned back to her, seeming both surprised and pleased, but that just wasn't enough. She couldn't just leave it at that. "For the record, I think the same of you."

For whatever reason, that didn't seem to register to him. "What do you mean?"

"I think you're very handsome," she said, having gathered her nerves again. Jaune's eyes widened, as if that was the last thing he'd expected to hear from her. Cinder couldn't help but laugh at his reaction, finding it endearing, but then again, everything he did

seemed endearing to her. "You act like nobody's said that to you before."

"Well, you'd be one of the first..."

Cinder stopped laughing. There was just no way that was true. Surely, he was just trying to be humble and downplay it? She refused to believe that she was one of the only people to ever compliment his looks.

"What? No I'm not," she said. "There has to be plenty of girls who have told you that."

Jaune smiled and scratched the back of his head. "Not really. Thank you for saying that, though. Do... do you actually think that?"

"Of course," she said immediately. "You're the most attractive person I know."

Jaune looked shocked. "You don't mean that! Seriously, that makes me feel great and all, but you don't have to lie to me. My ego's not *that* fragile."

Cinder pulled him closer, pressing her body against his. "I'm being honest! You look great, Jaune. You can't possibly have such a low opinion of yourself that you can't see that."

"It's not that I'm unhappy with myself," he said, bringing her some relief. "Just that, like I said, not many people have told me that before, and I've never really considered myself all that good-looking."

"Well, I beg to differ," she replied, "And even if I didn't, there's plenty more to like about you."

Jaune laughed her comment off. "T-thanks. Anyway," he said, changing the subject, "You said you wanted me to walk you around the campus, right? Is there anywhere in particular you want to go?"

Back to your dorm so we can "get to know each other."

She decided not to say that. Perhaps it would help if she scaled the flirting back a bit and made it a little more subtle? Couldn't hurt to try. Maybe being so overt had made it appear less genuine and he thought that she was just messing with him.

"Nowhere in particular, I just wanted to see some more of it with you." Jaune just nodded along, seemingly not having picked up on what those last few words really meant. "It's a nice campus, afterall."

"I'd agree. How about Haven? They have a good campus over there?"

"Of course," she lied. She'd never actually been to Haven for more than a day, much less gone as a student, but he didn't need to know that, now did he? "Although I can't say it's much better than Beacon's. Still, I enjoy attending."

"Good to hear." He paused for a second or two before giving a half-suppressed laugh. "My dad actually had a friend who went to Haven, and he talked about it as if it were prison. Clearly, you've had a better experience than he did."

"Oh, well, you know, they're... not as strict as they used to be. They still are now, but from what I've heard, it used to be much worse."

"Yea? Did your parents feed you horror stories about it like mine did about Beacon?"

Cinder shrugged. "I never knew my parents."

The fact had bothered her at some point, but now, she only felt indifferent about it. She had Jaune, why would she need parents? They'd just serve as a distraction, a waste of time to hold her back.

"O-oh." Jaune looked at her with empathy. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bring up any bad memories or anything."

Cinder couldn't help but smile, overjoyed that he was showing such sensitivity towards her. "That's quite alright, Jaune. You had no way of knowing, and I'm sure you wouldn't have brought up the subject if you did."

"Still," he said, frowning, "I'm sorry to remind you-"

"It's alright, Jaune." She didn't want him feeling guilty or thinking he'd done something wrong by mentioning the topic of family. "I mean it. You were just trying to make conversation, please don't feel bad about that."

Her beloved looked her right in the eyes, making her heart damn near pop out of her chest, and spoke to her in that sweet, captivating voice. "Alright, if you say so. I won't push the subject, but if you ever want to talk about it, you can always call me."

He was making it hard to stay off of him, more so than it already was. Nobody had ever made her feel so cared for, so safe. Sure, she could protect herself just fine, but it was more than that. It felt like it was okay for her to be vulnerable, like he would be there to comfort her if she needed it. Something about that had her heart soaring.

Cinder beamed. "T-thank you," she said, taking a deep breath to calm her emotions. "I don't think you realize how much that means to me."

"It's the least I could do for you. I mean, you're offering to train me after knowing me for just a few days, so you're helping me a lot more than I'm helping you."

It sure didn't feel that way. Still, if that's what he thought, that could only help her.

She opened her mouth to speak but a third voice interrupted her.

"Hey, Jaune-Boy!" Jaune groaned out of frustration. Cinder looked over and narrowed her eyes, recognizing the ginger boy who'd tried

to flirt with her the other day. "What are you doing skipping class, huh Jauney-Boy?"

She wanted so badly to just stab him and wipe that damn smirk off his face. It was one thing to insult her beloved, but it was another entirely to not only interrupt their alone time together, but do so by trying to make fun of him. If Jaune weren't right there next to her, she would've taught him a lesson he wouldn't forget.

"Look, Cardin, I really don't want to do this right now," he said.

So this wasn't the first time he's had to deal with this, then. Cinder clenched her fists and narrowed her eyes, feeling a surge of heat and energy build up in her palms. She wouldn't let this sorry excuse for a man push him around.

Cardin opened his mouth but she shut him down before he could even get a word out. "He asked you to leave," she said, glaring at him. "Now run along and let us have our conversation."

The ginger looked over at her for the first time and flinched, averting his eyes. Had he somehow not even noticed her there?

What an idiot...

"Yea, yea. Why don't you just let me talk to my friend for a second?"

His lack of eye contact ruined what was already a pathetic attempt at a display of confidence.

Cinder tightened her grip on Jaune's arm, who shifted on his feet and looked between them nervously. "Don't try to trick me," she growled at him. "Leave. Before I make you."

"What, I can't talk to people anymore?" Cardin finally managed to direct his gaze back towards her, but clearly had a hard time doing it. Damn coward.

"C'mon, Cardin," Jaune said. "Just leave us alone."

The boy hesitated a bit before turning around and walking the other way, muttering to himself under his breath. Jaune closed his eyes and let out a sigh of relief. Seeing the stress he'd caused her beloved, it took a lot of willpower not to stab him in the back.

One day, she'd do just that. Perhaps he could share a grave with Nikos.

"Does he give you trouble often, Jaune?" she asked, walking down the sidewalk again.

"Not *often*," he responded, his face tinted red with embarrassment. "At least not as much as he used to, and he doesn't do anything as bad as before. He acts like that with a bunch of people, though."

Her face grew hot with anger. What did Jaune, kind, innocent, perfect Jaune ever do to earn such treatment!? She had to take a few deep breaths to calm herself down before she had an outburst.

"That doesn't justify it or make it any better. You don't deserve that."

"Well, at least I know not to take it personally."

Cinder stopped suddenly and held him still. "Jaune, you don't need to act unbothered. It's perfectly reasonable for you to be upset over someone treating you like that."

"I know, I just..." Jaune looked off into the distance before giving his attention back to her. "I guess I feel like I hold some of the blame, you know? I let him push me around for too long without putting my foot down, so now he sees me as an easy target. Even if I do try to stop him."

"That doesn't make it your fault." She spoke assertively, trying hard to get her point across. "Believe me, I know plenty of people like him. There's little you can do to make him act differently, so stop criticizing yourself over it."

"Yea, you're right, but still..."

Deciding they'd lingered on the topic too long, Cinder grabbed his hand and walked him down the sidewalk again. "Come on. He doesn't deserve any of your thought and there's no reason to let him interrupt us like that. Forget about him."

Jaune nodded in agreement. "Right. I'll stop worrying about him."

Classes had only just ended by the time they got back to the dormitories. She really wanted to stay out longer, but Jaune had insisted that he get back to his team before they started looking for him, and who was she to deny him?

"I hope my team isn't too upset with me," Jaune said, fidgeting with his hands as he walked up the stairs next to her.

Cinder smiled at him to try to calm his nerves. "You'll be fine. Even if they are bothered, they'll get over it soon enough. Don't stress over it."

Clearly, his teammates were not good for him. He worried so much about what they'd think or how'd they'd react to what he was doing, both earlier when she'd convinced him to skip class and now when they were coming back. Eventually, she'd teach him to ignore their opinions.

Nikos stood waiting outside her team's dorm when they arrived, biting her nail with a look of worry on her face. Cinder rolled her eyes at that. Did they not trust him out of their sight for more than five minutes?

"Jaune!" she called out, jogging down the hall towards them. "Where have you been? I excused myself from class to call you but you didn't answer!"

"S-sorry, I, umm..." Jaune avoided making eye contact with his partner. "I didn't really feel like going to class, so I skipped it."

The redhead eyed Cinder suspiciously, who crossed her arms and glared back at her. "I take it you were with her, then?"

"He was," she said, "Although I fail to see how that's any of your business. He doesn't owe you any sort of explanation over who he chooses to spend his time with."

Cinder regretted speaking up as soon as she did. The first time she'd confronted Nikos could easily be excused as her having had a bad day, but now she probably looked overly hostile.

Nikos looked like she wanted to say something back, but Jaune spoke up before they could get into a full-blown argument. "I'm sorry, Pyrrha. I should've gone to class or at least told you where I was going, but I didn't. I'm sorry."

You don't owe her an apology, she wanted to say. She has no right to be upset with you.

It took a lot of restraint, but she managed to bite her tongue.

"It's alright, Jaune," she said, sighing. "Just come back to the dorm. Nora and Ren are just as worried as I was, even if they don't show it quite as much."

"Yea, I'll come." Jaune turned to her before leaving. "So... See you later then?"

"Of course. I'll be available whenever you'd like to spend some time together," she reminded him, watching them as they walked back to their dorm.

A familiar angry feeling grew in Cinder's chest as she watched him leave with Nikos.

Why'd those two ever have to become partners? The control that gave the little slut, all the opportunity she had with him sleeping just a few feet from him every night... Just thinking about it made her want to hurt someone.

Nikos didn't deserve that. What'd she ever do to earn a spot so close to him? Had she gotten it just for showing up at initiation? Cinder had spilled blood just to have the opportunity to talk to him, and yet this spoiled, red-haired bitch got to do everything with him!

How much had she sacrificed for him? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Her train of thought was interrupted by a singular spark entering her field of vision. She looked down and saw fire leaking from her closed fists, a sign that she needed to get her temper under control.

Pull yourself together. You've accomplished so much today, there's no need to dwell on this one little moment. Nikos is just a bump in the road. She may manage to slow you down if she's lucky, but she's powerless to stop you.

Indeed, Pyrrha Nikos was insignificant. One day, once she'd taken Jaune as her husband, she'd look back on her as an irrelevant part of her life. If she remembered her at all, that is.

Eventually, she managed to forget about Nikos and focus on all the lovely memories she'd just made. Even now, at least an hour after it happened, her heartbeat quickened when she remembered how he'd complimented her.

His beautiful smile when she responded in kind, those deep blue eyes that seemed to reflect the heavens, the color of his hair as it glistened in the sun - it was all so perfect. So very perfect.

And to think that all that will be mine...

She was so deep in thought that she almost didn't realize it when she'd made her way back to her room. Usually, she wasn't so easily

distracted.

Just as expected, Emerald and Mercury waited for her outside the room until she'd gotten back. Mercury hung back and leaned against the wall while Emerald had a seemingly one-sided conversation with a girl she recognized as Ruby Rose, RWBY's team leader and one of Jaune's friends.

Her subordinate turned away from Ruby to look at her as she approached. The latter also noticed her coming and stopped talking, sensing that Emerald was no longer paying attention to her.

"I'm glad you're back, Cinder. This is Ruby," she said, pretending that they didn't already know that. "I was just talking with her about weapons, among other things."

The girl looked at her with both curiosity and recognition. "So you must be Cinder, then? I've seen you hanging out with my friend, Jaune. Do you two know each other?"

Cinder opened her mouth to respond but the girl interrupted her before she could.

"S-sorry, is that weird? It's not like I'm stalking you or anything!" Ruby flashed a nervous smile and looked off to the side. "Sorry, I'm not too good at this whole 'meeting new people' thing, haha..."

Somehow, she didn't doubt that.

"Don't worry, I wasn't about to accuse you of anything. And yes, I do know your friend."

"Oh, good," she said, looking relieved. "I didn't want you to think I'm creepy or something. A-anyway, my partner is probably expecting me to get back and do homework soon, so I should go. It was nice meeting you, though."

Cinder took her outstretched hand and shook it. "Likewise."

The three of them entered their room as soon as the girl left.

"So, Emerald," Cinder said, "What did you manage to learn from her?"

"She told me that Ozpin let her into Beacon early after she stopped one of Torchwick's heists, but I doubt that's the full story. She doesn't seem to know anything else, though."

Cinder nodded along. "For now, we should continue monitoring her. It's unlikely she's aware of Salem, but we'll need to take action sooner or later if she does."

"Of course, ma'am."

"Now," she said, looking over at Mercury, "If you wouldn't mind stepping out for a second, Emerald? There's something important I must discuss in private with your partner regarding our mission."

Emerald looked surprised at that, but did as she told her regardless. Once she left and closed the door behind her, the two of them sat in silence for a few seconds before Cinder spoke up.

"Let's not waste time here. I'm sure you've already figured out what, or rather, who this little meeting is about." Cinder looked up at him and saw a look of understanding on his face. "While certainly not the greatest, I do appreciate your efforts so far, but I am going to have to ask more of you."

"You want more information on him?" he said, raising his eyebrow.

"I would like you to continue building a friendship with him, yes, but I doubt you'd be able to find anything I couldn't. No, there's something else more important than that," she said. "During the Vytal Festival, I need you to protect him."

Mercury looked up at her in confusion. "You already gave me a job, I'm supposed to-"

"Forget about that," she said, interrupting him. "I'll figure that part out, but right now the most important part of this is making sure I can trust that Jaune remains unharmed and doesn't discover my role in the ordeal. Do you understand?"

"I- yeah," he said, sighing out of frustration. "Yeah, I understand what you want me to do."

His ambiguity, whether intentional or not, was unacceptable.

"Good. Because- look at me, Mercury!" she snapped, noticing that his gaze was directed off to the side. Once he fixed that, she started again. "If I find *one* scratch on him after everything is said and done, or if he figures out that I'm to blame for destroying Beacon, I'm going to make sure you learn your lesson . That's a promise."

Mercury paused for a few seconds. "Yes ma'am. I'll make sure he's safe."

"Smart decision. Now, if you will excuse me, I have some business to attend to."

Cinder smirked as she heard the sound of bone being crushed under her boot, watching as Cardin Winchester squirmed on the ground beneath her.

His room number had been oh so easy to find, and with his teammates gone, it was even easier to force him out of it and break through his aura, which didn't even take her ten minutes. She'd been trying to keep things quiet, too. Of course, she hadn't really been expecting him to be strong, but that was just pathetic.

"G-get off my hand, you bitch!"

The "tough guy" persona he tried to display became a lot less convincing once he stopped getting back up. Not that it seemed convincing in the first place.

Cinder picked her foot up and kicked him in the nose, spilling fresh blood on the concrete. "Keep your mouth shut. I don't want to hear you talk unless I tell you to."

"You're fucking insa-!" His own cry of pain interrupted him as his head was smashed against the floor.

"Be silent," she snapped at him. "You're fortunate enough I've only broken a few bones, so I wouldn't start testing your luck."

Cardin looked up at her, scowling, but did as he was told and stayed silent. Thank the gods. His voice was like nails on a chalkboard to her. Utterly unbearable.

"Now, Cardin, I'm going to ask you some questions, and I *strongly* recommend you answer me with the truth, because I already don't have much patience for you. You got that?"

The boy glared at her for a few seconds before finally agreeing.

"Wonderful. First of all," she said, taking her boot off his head and kneeling down on one knee next to him, "From what I've heard, it seems you take pleasure in bothering a certain Jaune Arc, is that correct?"

Cardin slowly nodded.

"And what, exactly, makes you think you have *any* right to do that?" she said, pressing her knee down on his already broken hand.

"L-look, I'm sorry, okay? I'll leave him alone, just get off me already!"

She took no small amount of pleasure from the pain she was inflicting on him. After all, he'd put her beloved through too much for too long. He deserved to suffer, just as he was now.

"I'll ask again," she growled. "What makes you think you have the right to push him around?" Her words were met with silence. "A sense of superiority, perhaps? Or maybe it's the opposite, and you

do it to make yourself feel better?" Cinder scoffed. "Actually, I wouldn't be surprised. If I were you, I'd also hate myself."

That clearly got to him, as evidenced by his face going red and his clenched jaw.

"I just *enjoy* it, okay?" he yelled. "And he's weak, so he can't really fight back. It's not like I pick on him because I hate him in particular, he's an easy target!"

Cinder stomped his head against the ground again. "If I hear you talk bad about him one more time, you're going to regret it. And believe me, you don't want to know what I'll do if you try picking on him again, so you'd be smart to stop."

"Alright, I will! Hell, I'll even apologize to him if you want! Just leave me alone!"

She rolled her eyes at that, having seen this same thing from countless people. He was trying to appease her by offering more than she'd asked for, hoping that it would get him out of his current situation. It never worked.

As for an apology, that simply wasn't something she wanted from him. Jaune, being as gracious as he was, would certainly forgive him if he were to do that, and that was something he didn't deserve in the slightest.

"Don't apologize. Just never bother him again, and never talk to me again, and this won't have to happen again. Got that?"

"Y-yes, just get off me!"

Cinder considered breaking another bone or two, but ultimately decided she'd done enough, at least for now.

"Fine. Just don't forget what I've told you."

Chapter 9

Cinder tugged at the end of her dress, straightening it out as she walked down the hallway towards Jaune's dorm. Despite having gotten very little sleep the night before, she had plenty of energy.

The day had finally come. Today, they would finally have some real time alone together, and if all went well, she'd have a date with him by the end of it.

She'd devoted almost the entirety of the last week to arranging this. Sure, it was a rather simple plan, but it could *not* go wrong. Everything had to be perfect for him. That meant staying in the safest part of town (not that she'd let him go anywhere dangerous in the first place), eating at the best restaurants, and of course, treating him like the prince he was. She'd have him on his knees *begging* for her by the end of it.

Cinder could hardly contain her excitement once she got to his dorm. Of course, she still had a good forty-five minutes before they were actually supposed to meet, but there was no point in waiting around, was there?

After knocking, she took a step back and waited for a few seconds. Getting no response, she stepped up to knock again but stopped when the door opened to reveal Jaune, looking absolutely divine in a simple collared shirt and jeans. Gods, he made everything look so *good*.

"Hello, Jaune," she said, beaming. "I know I'm a little early, but I really couldn't wait to meet up with you. Are you ready to leave yet?"

He seemed surprised to see her, but didn't turn her away. "O-oh, that's alright. I'm almost ready, but I still need to get a few things organized. Do you mind waiting for a minute or two?"

"Of course not. Take as much time as you need."

Jaune smiled at her and shut the door. "Thanks. I won't take too long."

Cinder shuffled on her feet, already eager for him to come back out. The voices coming from inside made her want to put her ear against the door and listen, but she didn't want to get caught spying on him. Couldn't let Nikos use anything like that to keep them apart, after all.

A good minute passed when part of her started to consider knocking again, but luckily he came out before she got too impatient. Once again, he took her breath away.

How was it even possible for someone to look so good and be such an amazing person on top of that? She couldn't believe how lucky it was that he was still single. Of course, he probably had plenty of ex-girlfriends that she'd have to deal with at some point of another, but he obviously didn't have anyone as of now.

"Sorry about that," he said, "I must have had the time mixed up, thought we were meeting a little later. I didn't keep you waiting for too long, did I?"

Her heart started doing backflips in her chest. The first thing he'd thought of when he'd woken up was her!

"Oh, you didn't get anything mixed up, I just came to your dorm a little early." Cinder put her hand around his arm and began walking him down the hall towards the stairway. "The bullheads get going a little later today since it's the weekend, but we should be able to get one by the time we get down there."

Jaune nodded. "Right, and there probably won't be much of a wait this early in the day, either. Good thinking. And thanks for inviting me, by the way."

Cinder felt like she was about to explode. No way in hell would she make it to the end of this without losing it.

"Of course, Jaune. I want you here."

Just as they'd both predicted, almost nobody else was in the courtyard when they got there. Hopefully, it would be the same once they got back. She planned on returning late, that way they'd have as much time together as possible and there wouldn't be too many students around when they got back. Not as many distractions that way.

Jaune took a deep sigh as they boarded one of the bullheads, seeming almost nervous to get in. Cinder looked at him with worry. Surely, she hadn't already done something to make him feel uncomfortable with her?

"Are you alright, Jaune? You seem a bit tense."

"O-oh, sorry," he said, scratching at the back of his neck. "I, um, have motion sickness. It's not *that* bad, but it can make flying a little difficult, especially considering I just ate half an hour ago."

Cinder put her hand on his shoulder and smiled reassuringly. "I'm sure it'll be alright. Just don't focus on it and you'll be fine."

It didn't take long for them to take off. She noticed him sway ever so slightly when they did, which of course meant she had to wrap her hands around his arm and pull him close to help keep him still.

"T-thanks," he said, red in the face.

"Just making sure you're alright."

Although the city was much more crowded than Beacon, in a way, it offered them more privacy. The people in Vale meant nothing to them, so even if they were, for some reason, interested in their

conversation, she couldn't care less if they heard what they said to each other.

"Man, it's been a while since I was last here." Jaune looked at their surroundings with awe. "I've only visited on all but a few occasions, but it's managed to amaze me every single time. Then again, I'm from the middle of nowhere, so it's kind of easy to impress me."

Cinder raised her eyebrows. "Really? You haven't come here with your team?"

"Nope. Pyrrha doesn't usually like going out in public because people always swarm her, and since we normally do everything as a team, that means we mostly hang out on campus. Can't really say I blame her, though."

Her smirk grew with every word. Not only was the 'Invincible Girl' too scared to confess her feelings, but she didn't even want to go out in public with him. How exactly did she expect that to work out for her? Oh, well. Just yet another reason for him to pick Cinder.

"I see. I presume you visited with your family, then? How are they?"

Jaune's face lit up. "They're great. Wouldn't trade them for the world."

Cinder considered that for a second. She planned on trying to limit the amount of time he spent around his family, but he seemed to be attached to them. That would make that a more complicated process, especially considering how big his family was. His seven sisters likely would not want to let him go.

Of course, she wasn't actually supposed to know that he had seven sisters, but that wasn't important.

"What about you?" he asked, looking over at her. "Have you been before?"

"A few times, yes, but not in a while. Since neither of us know the city too well, why don't we explore a bit?"

Jaune shrugged. "Sounds good to me."

While she certainly didn't feel good about lying to him, it was far from unjustified. Her cover relied on her being a Haven student, one unfamiliar with Vale and its academy, so even if she did know the city like the back of her hand, it'd be better if he wasn't aware of that.

Besides, she could work that to her advantage. If they didn't have anywhere specific to be, they would be able to spend more time together. One day, he'd thank her for that.

Now, what to buy him? She'd considered getting him a watch or something fancy like that, but that didn't seem quite his style. A hoodie perhaps? He was usually wearing one, and she had a strange suspicion that he'd recently happened to lose one, so that could be a good idea.

"This looks like a nice place," she said, pointing to a clothing store across the street, one she'd picked out beforehand. "Why don't we check it out?"

Jaune followed her hand and looked to where she was pointing. "Sure, why not?"

The store they entered wasn't very big, but it still had a good inventory, so she was confident she could find something he liked.

"Are you going to buy anything, Jaune?"

"Eh," he said, shrugging, "I'll probably just look around. I don't have a ton of money, so I can't spend too much on anything non-essential."

Alarm bells started going off in her head. She was losing his interest! She needed to buy him something and move on before he got bored,

or her chances with him would only get worse and worse.

"If that's the case, then let me get you something."

"Huh?" Jaune looked over at her, looking more confused than anything. "I mean, I appreciate it, but I seriously can't ask you to do that for me."

"It's nothing, Jaune," she said, waving that off. "I'm more than willing. Just point out something you like and I'll pay for it."

"Seriously, Cinder, that's super generous, but don't you think that's asking too much of you?"

"You're not asking anything of me, I'm offering." Cinder wandered over to where they kept their jackets and looked around. They were a bit pricey, but that meant nothing to her. Not when it came to her Jaune. "You wear hoodies a lot, don't you? Why don't I get you one of these?"

Jaune scratched the back of his neck, a nervous habit she'd noticed whenever he got anxious or didn't know how to respond to something. "I, ah, I'm really flattered you're willing to do this for me, but you really don't have to."

"What if I want to?"

He didn't seem to have a response to that. He kept trying to argue, but apparently couldn't think of another way to reject her offer. "I- I mean, it's not like I don't want you to, but I just think-"

"Just let me buy you something, Jaune," she said, giggling.

Jaune sighed and slumped his shoulders. "You don't have to, you know."

"Well, I'm going to, so come help me pick something out or I'll just find something for you myself." Cinder pulled a plain black hoodie off the rack and held it up for him to see. "What about this one? I bet

this'll look good on you. But then again," she said, winking, "You look good in everything."

A blush crept its way onto his face. "T-thanks."

Eventually, she managed to find something he liked and brought it to the register, despite his continued protesting. Being the modest person that he was, he kept insisting that she didn't need to do anything like that for him, but that just wasn't true. Besides, he needed to get used to receiving gifts from her.

The two of them left the store, Jaune carrying his new hoodie under his arm. "You really shouldn't have, but thank you."

"It was nothing. Seeing you smile made it more than worth it," she said, grinning.

Jaune looked down at the ground, blushing, and scratched the back of his neck. "O-oh, that's... that's really nice of you," he said, chuckling.

Her heart fluttered. This was going exactly how it was supposed to! He'd accepted her gift, seen how kind she could be, and was genuinely enjoying himself! If the rest of their time together stayed on this course, he'd be as good as her's.

"Like I said, it was nothing."

The rest of their morning went by smoothly. They got lunch at a quaint little place a bit a ways away from the clothing store, which he seemed to enjoy. Of course, she paid for it in full, despite Jaune once again putting up a fight.

It was fantastic. Perfect. If there was a heaven, it couldn't compare to how she felt with him. Every time she fixed her gaze on him, he smiled back at her with this look of contentment, like he really wanted to be there with her. Nobody had ever made her feel truly special like this before.

Part of her wanted to take her chances and confess early, but she couldn't risk it quite yet. Not until the rest of the day was over. The more time he spent having fun with her, the more likely he was to say yes.

Eventually, once they felt they'd spent enough time exploring the city, they decided to get dinner together. Jaune wanted to eat early so that he could get back to his team before they got worried, and she supposed that was alright with her. That was just who he was, showing consideration even to those who didn't deserve it.

This, of course, was the most important part of their day together. Cinder planned on asking him out soon after, so it *needed* to go well. She couldn't have him walking away from this having had a bad experience because of the last ninety minutes or so.

The restaurant she chose wasn't anything too grand, but it certainly had some level of sophistication that the average place didn't. She wanted to save the best for their dates together.

"This place sure is nice," he said, taking a seat at their table. "Can't say we had anything like this back home."

She loved how easy it was to impress him. It just made him that much more attainable.

"You make it sound like you didn't have much of anything in your hometown," she said, smiling amusedly.

"I guess I didn't. We lived way out in the country, so if you wanted something fancy you'd have to drive a few hours. There were a few family-owned restaurants, sure, but they were far from extravagant. What about you?"

Cinder stiffened, unprepared for the question. "What about me?"

Jaune continued to stare at her, awaiting a response. "Yeah, what about you? Where'd you grow up?"

For some reason, she hadn't expected the question. Sure, he knew that she grew up without her parents, but other than that, he didn't have any information. For all he knew, she could've had just as great a childhood as him. It really shouldn't have taken her off-guard.

"I grew up in Atlas. It... wasn't all that great. Not much to talk about, really."

"S-sorry," he said, stuttering, "I didn't mean to bring up a painful subject or anything like that."

Cinder shook her head. "Don't apologize. I know it wasn't on purpose."

The two of them sat there for a few seconds, silent, as Cinder thought over her next move.

Come to think of it, there was something to be gained from having that conversation. Sympathy points, if you will. After all, how could he possibly reject the sweet, poor girl who'd suffered such awful abuses?

Of course, she did run the risk of making him feel uncomfortable by dumping all that on him, but more likely he'd just want to comfort her, which was exactly what she wanted.

Well, the reward certainly outweighs the risk... Perhaps I should take the chance?

Cinder looked off to the side, trying to appear unsure of herself. "Can I... confide in you about something?"

Jaune blinked. "Huh? O-oh, yeah, of course."

"I... didn't exactly have a very good childhood," she said, clearing her throat. "My parents weren't in the picture, as you know, and my foster family was... unkind, to put it lightly." Jaune looked at her with concern, but let her talk. She had to stop herself from grinning. "The

woman who adopted me essentially forced me to work for her, and her daughters made it their mission to torment me. They... abused me, made sure I felt worthless, and didn't even allow me a bed. I escaped after a while, but even then, I had to fend for myself on the streets. For a while, I considered giving up. Looking back, getting a spot in Haven... that might have been the first truly good thing to ever happen to me."

Cinder buried the upper half of her face into her sleeve, pretending to hide tears that weren't really there. "S-sorry, I... I haven't... I haven't really told anyone this before, and... I-I'm sorry to dump that on you."

Honestly, it was hard not to feel impressed with herself. If the look on Jaune's face was anything to go by, she'd sold the act perfectly.

Jaune paused, trying to think of something to say. "I'm... so sorry to hear that." They sat there for a few seconds in silence. "Look, I... I don't really know what to say, but just know that you're not alone anymore. I'm here for you if you want me to be."

Cinder's heart pounded in her ears. Even when he had every right to dismiss her, to ignore her and change the subject, he instead chose to show the utmost empathy. Even though he couldn't possibly know what she'd gone through, he still made her feel understood.

Her breathing got heavy as she tried her best to hide her happiness.

"Are you... alright?" Jaune looked off to the side, breaking eye contact. "S-sorry, that was a stupid question."

"Jaune, please. Don't apologize. None of this was even remotely your fault." Cinder put on her best sad smile and reached over the table to grab his hand. "If anything, it's nice to have someone to talk to about this. Thank you."

Jaune smiled back at her. "Of course, Cinder. I'm just glad I could make you feel a little better."

Cinder was riding high for the rest of dinner.

The sun was about to set by the time they arrived at the park. After walking around for a short while, they found a small, secluded area and sat down at a nearby bench.

Her nerves were starting to get to her. Part of her refused to believe it would be as simple as asking. She'd spent years working to make sure that this could happen, and now that she had the perfect opportunity, and all she had to do was ask, it just seemed too easy.

Still, she wasn't going to back out any time soon. This meant everything to her, and she wasn't going to let anything stop her.

"I had a really nice time with you, Jaune," she said, sliding closer to him.

"Yeah, I had a good time, too."

She put her hand on his shoulder, staring into his eyes. "I know it's only been a week or so, but I really feel like you understand me. I..." Cinder stopped. A voice deep in the back of her mind spoke up.

What if he doesn't feel the same way?

No. Now was not the time to doubt herself. She could *not* dance around the topic or even *think* about backing out. If he was going to be her's, she had to make her feelings and intentions as clear as possible.

"I... Listen, I..."

She couldn't get the words out. She wanted to, *needed* to, but for the life of her, she just couldn't.

Jaune looked at her with worry. "Are you alright?"

"Y-yes, I am, I just..." Cinder took a deep breath. "I really like you."

She didn't realize how nervous she actually was until she said it. Her stomach was in knots as she crossed her legs to stop them from shaking and waited for him to respond.

"Thanks," he said, smiling, "I really like you too."

Cinder pursed her lips. He accepted that too easily, like he didn't really know what she was telling him. She knew he was dense, sure, but was he seriously this convinced that all she wanted was a platonic friendship?

"I..." Her words got caught in her throat. He really was making this harder than it should have been.

Just tell him! You have nothing to worry about, and it's not like he's going to reject you. Just don't have a breakdown and everything will go just as you've always imagined it!

"I mean romantically," she said, turning back towards him. Jaune stared at her as if she spoke a different language. "I think there's something really special between us, and I was..." Cinder almost froze up again, but managed to power through. "I was wondering if you'd let me take you out on a date?"

Her beloved sat there, completely still. "You... want to go out on a date with me?"

All she could do was nod, barely able to look him in the eye.

"O-oh. Well... I can't say I expected that," he said, laughing.

Her stomach dropped. Did he not feel the same way? Surely, after all she'd done to make sure he'd love her back, he couldn't possibly reject her, right?

Jaune smiled, his face tinted red. "Sure, Cinder. I'd love to go out with you."

Relief washed over her as she let out a shaky breath she didn't realize she was holding, her muscles finally relaxing.

See? He *did* have feelings for her! How could she have ever doubted that?

"Great! I can start planning our date right when I get back to my dorm, or if you have something in mind, I'll really don't mind letting you-" Cinder stopped to gather her composure and took a deep breath. "S-sorry," she said, smiling ear to ear. "I just... it feels like I've been waiting forever to tell you this."

Jaune chuckled. "That's quite alright. I probably would've reacted the same way," he said, scratching the back of his neck.

Her body and heart urged her to jump on top of him right then and there. She finally had him! After all this time, she'd finally gotten the one thing she'd ever wanted!

Images of their future together flashed through her mind as she stared at him. She just couldn't take her eyes off of him, especially now that he was her's. Officially, that is. He'd always been her's, but now that they were about to start their life together, it was irrefutable. He belonged to her.

Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. Everything except her beloved seemed to fade away into nothingness.

He's mine! He loves me back! Now we can finally be together!

"You, ah... you alright?"

Cinder snapped out of it and noticed her right arm shaking. "Of course," she said, grabbing it with her other arm. "I'm just happy is all."

For the love of Oum, just keep your composure until you're at least back at Beacon!

Jaune blushed. "R-right." Oum, how could anyone possibly look away from that face? "Well, we should probably get going back to Beacon soon."

Cinder closed her eyes and put her head on his shoulders, leaning into him and causing him to freeze up. "Why don't we wait here a little longer?"

"..."

"... Jaune?"

"O-oh, yea, let's, uh... y-yea. That's fine. Great, even!" he said, his blush deepening.

Cinder giggled. He was just so cute when he got nervous.

She stayed there hugged up against him for a while longer, not wanting to let him go just yet. His body felt so warm, so comforting. Sitting there, leaned up against him, it really seemed like nothing could go wrong.

Their surroundings were much the same when she opened her eyes. The sun had gotten lower, obviously, but they were still mostly isolated in their little corner of the park, outside one other person who'd wandered in at some point and sat not too far from them. Some short girl with black hair, no one to be concerned about.

She almost disregarded her completely, but noticed she was staring at them. That made sense, though. The girl probably just saw how close she and Jaune were and felt jealous of her.

Just ignore her. Enjoy the moment, you've earned it.

Cinder wanted to do just that, but she just couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. Looking over, she saw that the girl was still staring at them. At her.

She glared back at the girl, figuring that would get her to mind her own business, but it had the opposite effect. In response, she just smiled and leaned her head against her hand.

It was subtle, unnoticeable to the average person, but something was off about her. She looked like she'd just uncovered some big secret and couldn't be more satisfied with it, not like some innocent little girl who just happened to have a habit of sticking her nose into other people's business.

It was probably nothing, though. Just her being paranoid. Jaune's safety was quite important, afterall.

Still, she just couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to it than that...

Cinder narrowed her eyes, looking towards the girl, who sat not forty feet across from her. She watched as she leaned forward, meeting her gaze, and slowly blinked. When she opened her eyes, she revealed a mismatching set of eyes, one brown and one pink.

She was on her feet within the second. As soon as she stood, Roman's little crony shattered like glass, disappearing.

Shit...

"Excuse me for a moment," she said, turning to Jaune. "I need to use the restroom. This shouldn't take too long."

Cinder didn't even wait for a response before dashing off, running across that route that led back to the main part of town.

Neo was evasive, but she couldn't have gotten far. Unfortunately, though, her semblance was practically perfect for hiding in plain sight. If she wanted to find her, she'd have to see through whatever disguise she put up to avoid being caught.

Still, she had to try. She'd seen her with Jaune. If she wasn't dangerous before, she certainly was now.

Shit, shit, shit...

Cinder turned the corner and saw a small crowd of people walking through the streets. There probably weren't more than fifty, but each and every one of them could have been Neo.

Scanning the road, she saw the same black hair and blue eyes that had followed her and Jaune into the park and immediately gave chase. The girl broke into a thousand pieces and vanished, reappearing at the end of the street and turning the corner. Cinder sprinted after her.

When she caught up, she saw Neopolitan, undisguised, standing in the middle of a busy sidewalk. Cinder stopped and stared back at her, waiting for her to make a move. She never did. She didn't have to, either. Only an idiot would try killing someone in the middle of the city around so many people.

Realizing that she wasn't leaving anytime soon, Cinder walked up to her and stood close enough so that she had to look down to see her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she said, spitting the words out.

Neo just smirked. She might have not been able to talk, but her demeanor alone was enough to make her want to put a knife through her throat.

Cinder put her hands on her hips and glanced around. "I'll make this quick. What you saw here is going to stay here," she said, leaning down at her and glaring. "If this gets back to Roman, or anyone else for that matter, I'm going to kill him and then kill you. And don't even *think* you can hurt him, because if you do, I'll make sure there's nothing left to identify you with. Are we clear?"

Neo's expression didn't change. She was tempted to set her ablaze right then and there.

I have to leave. Jaune probably expects me back before long.

"Well, I'd just *love* to stay and talk, but unfortunately, I have business elsewhere at the moment. Just know I'll be watching you," she said, turning over to Neo one more time before heading back to where she came from.

Fuck... Now Mercury and Neo both know about Jaune, and I have to spend time making sure she keeps her dirty little hands off of him. At least with Mercury I found a way to use it to my advantage.

Cinder walked with clenched fists back to where she'd left Jaune, trying to calm herself down.

Fuck, fuck, fuck...

He couldn't see her like this. He'd know something was wrong, and she wanted to avoid worrying him as much as she possibly could.

Luckily, her temper calmed down as soon as she saw him. He looked so happy, smiling to himself as he sat on that bench. She still felt worried, but it was impossible for her to be angry when she saw that smile.

"Are you ready to head back to Beacon?" she asked, walking up next to him.

Jaune beamed, making her heart melt. "Yeah, let's go."

Cinder was starting to feel much better by the time they got off the bullhead. Sure, Neo knowing about her relationship with Jaune was far from ideal, but one way or another, she'd keep her in line.

Besides, she'd just gotten a date with Jaune! Now all she had to do was avoid messing it up or dragging him into her plans. How hard could that be?

Oh, she could not *wait* to see Nikos' face when the news got back to her, the pure *despair* when she realized that the perfect man had been taken away from her, all because she was too scared to make a move. Maybe she'd get really lucky and the redhead would accept defeat and finally fuck off.

"I had an amazing time tonight," she said, holding his hand. The fact that he let her do that, along with how bright the moon was above them, made the scene all the more romantic.

"I did, too," he said, his face still tinted red. He hadn't stopped blushing since she asked him out, and she found that absolutely adorable. "I'm looking forward to doing this again."

"Likewise, Jaune."

They took the stairway up to the dorms, stopping by his first. The last thing she wanted to do at that moment was say goodbye, but she doubted he could be convinced to come back with her to her room. Besides, that would also mean finding a reason to make Emerald and Mercury leave.

"So," he said, his hand on the doorknob, "When do you wanna... go out?" He spoke hesitantly, like he still wasn't sure that that's what they were doing.

"As soon as you're able to. Do you have any plans tomorrow?"

"I'll be training with my team then, but I'm free for next weekend. That work for you?"

Cinder beamed. "Of course."

"Great. I'll see you later then?"

"I'll be counting the minutes." She meant that in much more literal terms than he probably realized.

Jaune opened the door and walked in. Just before he shut it, she saw Nikos jump out of bed, probably all worked up about him being gone again.

Slut.

Walking back to her own dorm, the full weight of the situation finally hit her.

She'd gotten a date.

With Jaune.

Her sweet, beloved, perfect, amazing Jaune had agreed to go out on a date with her.

Cinder's knees felt like jelly. Her breathing got unsteady and her legs started shaking, threatening to buckle out from under her. She felt dizzy, too. Everything around her started spinning.

Despite feeling like the world was melting around her, she managed to stumble into a bathroom and lock the door behind her. She put her back against the wall and slid down onto the floor, her vision becoming blurry. How was it possible for him to have such an effect on her?

It took effort to even think straight. The burning feeling in her chest - one she'd become most familiar with since finding him - had become unbearably strong. The rest of her body went completely numb.

We're together now! Oh Oum, we're together now!

She could hardly see now, tears obscuring her vision as they streamed down her face. The ringing in her ears got louder and louder. It felt like she'd been electrocuted.

Cinder rushed to the toilet, kneeled in front of it, and threw up.

Pyrrha looked down at her bedsheets, unable to look Nora in the eye. The current topic wasn't exactly one she particularly enjoyed discussing.

"Come *on*, Pyrrha! He won't be on the market forever, you gotta tell him!" Her teammate was practically yelling in her face, but at this point, she'd given up on trying to get her to quiet down.

"I'm not waiting *forever*," she retorted, biting her fingernail, "I'm just... you know... looking for the right time."

"Yea, yea, you've only used that excuse a million times." Nora climbed up onto her bed from the end of it so that she sat directly across from her. "I think you're missing the point here. Jaune is out with another girl *right now* while you're sitting here at the dorm!"

"Inside voice, Nora," Ren said from the other side of the room.

"Yes, Rennie!" she said, now speaking in a normal volume. Why did she only listen when Ren told her? "Anyways, as I was saying, you need to get your act together before this Cinder girl takes him, and not just for your sake, but for Jaune's."

Pyrrha raised her eyebrows. "For Jaune's sake? Nora, I get what you're trying to do, and I appreciate the encouragement, but this isn't some selfless cause to save him from her or anything like that."

"Oh, but it is." Nora spoke so confidently that she almost believed her without any explanation. "Listen, Pyrrha, this girl just *screams* 'crazy girlfriend.' If you sit back and let her and Jaune become a couple, things are gonna go bad for him. Trust me, I know these things."

"Look, I may not like her much either, but don't you think that may be a *bit* of an overreaction?"

"Come on, think about it!" she said, interrupting her. "You caught her stalking him-"

"I'm pretty sure she was looking at me, Nora."

"Details, details. As I was saying, you caught her stalking him, she got all pissed off when you cut in on their conversation, she's all touchy with him despite only knowing him for a few days, I could go on. I'm telling you, she's bad news!"

"W-well, I trust Jaune's judgment. If she was that bad, he wouldn't want anything to do with her."

Nora deadpanned. "Really? We're talking about the guy who spent months going after Weiss Schnee. He's one of my best friends, too, but come on."

"Weiss isn't *that* bad," she mumbled.

"Oh really? Everybody in here who likes Weiss, raise your hand!" Pyrrha looked back down at her bedsheets. Ren just shrugged. "See? We have three people in here, and zero who like Weiss. That's zero percent, so nobody likes her."

"I don't think-"

"Any ways, we're getting off-track." Despite only being a few feet away from her, Nora pointed towards Pyrrha, shoving her finger in front of her face. "You need to confess, and soon! Starting tonight, there will be no more dilly-dallying! As soon as you find an opportunity, you will take it and you *will* get a date with Jaune, whether you like it or not!"

Pyrrha swallowed. "O-okay, you're right. I'll talk to him once I get the chance."

"Nope! Not good enough!" Nora was back to shouting. "You're not going to *wait* for anything, you're going to pull him aside, dragging

him if you have to, and tell him how you feel! And you'll do it tomorrow!"

"Yes, you're right," she said, sitting up a little straighter, "I will- wait, tomorrow!?"

"Yup! Tomorrow. And I'm going to be there to watch and make sure you don't chicken out! Aren't I such a supportive friend?"

Pyrrha slumped back over. "Do I *have* to do it tomorrow? Surely we can find another time?"

"Nope! Tomorrow is perfect! We'll be spending the day training together as a team, remember? Me and Rennie will just give you two some space for a few minutes and you can tell him then!"

Nora spoke like it was such an easy thing to do. If she had half that confidence, she would've confessed months ago.

"Okay... I'll try."

"Listen," Nora said, closing the distance between them, "You are Pyrrha Nikos. The Pyrrha Nikos I know does not *try*, she *does*. So are you going to *try* asking him out or are you going to ask him out?"

Pyrrha sat straight again and closed her eyes, gathering as much confidence as she could. "You're right... I'm going to ask him out. Tomorrow."

Saying it certainly felt all good and easy, but she had a feeling actually doing it would be a bit harder. Nora seemed satisfied, though.

"That's the spirit! Say it again!"

"I'm going to ask Jaune out. Tomorrow. I'm going to tell him that I-"

Without warning, she was interrupted by the sound of the door opening, making her jump out of bed. Jaune stood in the doorway,

looking at the three of them.

"Sorry I'm a little late, guys," he said, shutting the door behind him.
"What did I miss?"

Pyrrha tried her best to look nonchalant. "Nothing! Absolutely nothing!"

Jaune raised his eyebrows. "Um... alright then? I'm going to get in the shower."

"Yup! You go do that! Have fun!" Pyrrha noticed the rest of her team staring at her, Nora looking wholly unimpressed and Jaune looking flat out confused.

Oh brother gods. She was going to be the first person to ruin her confession a full day before it even happened.

Chapter 10

Jaune smiled to himself and whistled a tune as he set his tray down at an empty spot. Usually, he'd sit next to Nora and Pyrrha, but they decided to hang back at their dorm for a little longer while he and Ren went to the cafeteria. For whatever reason, they'd been in a big hurry to get him out the door. Something about having a girl-talk. Whatever the case, he was perfectly fine with leaving. Living with seven sisters had taught him to keep himself out of that sort of thing.

Taking a seat, he decided to enjoy the silence in the cafeteria while he could. Usually, the room got pretty loud during meal times, especially with Nora sitting right there next to him.

"A little weird how quiet it is, huh?" he said, earning a hum of agreement from Ren.

The two of them sat there without speaking for a few minutes, eating their breakfast. The silence would usually be awkward, but it didn't feel that way with Ren. Rather, it was a silence of mutual respect, one of understanding. Or maybe he was just in a good mood, who knows.

But hey, who could blame him? Things were looking up for him, big time. It wasn't because his grades were going up, even though they were, or that he was finally making real progress with his fighting, although he was, no, it was something different. Something even bigger.

He, Jaune Arc, had finally managed to score a date. Yup, that's right. In one short week, he'd be going out on a date with Cinder Fall.

Jaune blushed as he remembered their outing into the city, specifically, the part where she'd asked him out. Honestly, that had been the last thing he'd expected to happen. He wasn't complaining, though. She was awfully nice to him, and not to mention beautiful.

Hell, even if he wasn't at all interested, she made it pretty hard to say no to her with that backstory of her's. It was seriously a miracle that she'd turned out to be as great as she was after all that.

"You sure are happy," Ren said, breaking his train of thought. It was impressive how easily he could read him without a single word spoken between them. "Something happen?"

Jaune leaned back in his chair. "I'm just in a really good mood today, that's all."

His teammate looked at him skeptically. He would've loved to brag, but he didn't want to have Nora interrogating him about it and, worse yet, letting everybody else know so they could question him, too. For how little Ren talked, it was amazing how much his childhood friend managed to get out of him.

"Just in a really good mood, huh? Nothing happened?"

"Yeah, man. Sometimes you just wake up and feel great about everything, y'know?"

Jaune could tell he wasn't buying it. He was a terrible liar, after all. Still, Ren didn't dig any deeper. Maybe he would have if something was wrong, but why would he get concerned over his friend being happy?

As the sun got higher, more and more students came into the cafeteria to eat. Eventually, their sister team, Team RWBY, joined them, sitting across from the two.

As soon as she saw him, Yang grinned ear to ear. She took her seat without ever breaking eye contact. Jaune braced himself, having a pretty good feeling that he knew what this was about. She finally had a chance to tease him for that conversation with Cinder.

Jaune looked over to Ren, hoping to get some dialogue going with him to avoid talking to Yang. "So... the girls have been in the dorm

for a while, huh?"

"You're right," his friend responded, checking the clock that hung on the nearby wall. Seeing the time, he sighed and stood up. "I should probably go check on them."

"H-hey!"

Come on! Was he seriously about to leave him here with her?!

Ren didn't even look back at his calling, making a beeline towards the exit. Oh, whatever. He wouldn't have been any help, anyway.

Looking up, he saw that Yang still hadn't stopped staring him down. That had gotten the attention of Ruby and Weiss, who glanced between the two of them. Blake still hadn't taken her eyes off of her book.

"So..." he said, looking down at the table, "Crazy weather we've been having, huh?" The comment earned nothing but raised eyebrows. The weather had not, in fact, been crazy. On the contrary, it'd been nothing but blue skies for the past few weeks.

Weiss spoke up, narrowing her eyes. "What exactly is going on here?"

"Oh, nothing." Still grinning, Yang leaned her chair back, clasping her hands behind her head. "It's just that Vomit Boy here's got a date."

Ruby turned to him and gasped. "Jaune! Is that true?"

His face lit up. "N-no! What Yang here is *referring* to is a friend who I happened to hang out with yesterday. A friend who just *happens* to be a girl."

"A *hot* girl," Yang shouted. Almost identically to the last time, Ruby turned to him and once again gasped. Weiss just rolled her eyes. "One who just *happened* to ask him to take her into the city."

Jaune sputtered. "That doesn't mean we went on a date!"

"Yeah... I don't believe you." Yang rested her head on her closed fist. "So where are you gonna take her next? Nice candlelit dinner, maybe?"

"Yang, please," Weiss said, swooping in to save him. "I'm sure she meant it purely platonically and Jaune just happened to misunderstand the situation." Or not.

"I- what? How does that even- But I'm the one-" Jaune shook his head. "Look, point is, we are not dating! So if you could please drop the subject, that'd be wonderful."

Just then, he felt a hand rest on his shoulder from behind him. "Hello, darling," Cinder said. "I'm looking forward to our date coming up. I'm sure it will be a great time." With that, she left as quickly as she came, running her fingers through a lock of his hair as she walked off.

Jaune's face went red as he buried it in his hands. He could just feel the cheshire grin coming from the other side of the table. The laughter was pretty obvious, too.

Oh Oum, kill me now.

Weiss clicked her tongue. "Well, I seem to have misread the situation. You two are clearly in a committed relationship, although I can't say I understand why you denied it."

Committed?! Where'd she get that from?

Jaune held his hands out in front of him in exasperation. "Because we're not *in* a committed relationship! We agreed to go on one date together!"

"I don't know, Vomit Boy," Yang said, "She seemed pretty damn comfortable with you there. You sure she isn't your girlfriend?"

"Yes!"

"I agree with Yang." It was Ruby, of all people, who spoke up this time. "It looked like she really likes you."

Jaune's eye twitched. No offense to Ruby, but he was pretty sure that she was the last person at the table qualified to speak on the subject. "And what exactly tells you that?"

"Mostly the part where she called you darling, plus the part where she touched your hair. Personally, I wouldn't let anyone put their hand on my mane until at least a few years into dating." Yang flicked a lock of hair behind her ear. "That's just me, though."

Her mane. She called it her *mane*. He was surrounded by lunatics. They were his friends, but they were lunatics. Although, in all honesty, her calling him 'darling' was a little weird. Still, what made them so adamant that he was wrong about this whole thing?!

He looked around the table, begging for anyone with some sense to speak up, but everyone seemed to be in agreement with Yang.

"I also think Yang's right about this."

Jaune turned to Blake, shocked that she'd not only been listening in the first place, but also bothered to contribute to the conversation. "Yeah?" he said, once the shock wore off. "Well, I'm positive *Ninjas of Love* provides plenty of realistic advice on how relationships are supposed to work, so maybe I'd better defer to you."

Blake frowned. " *Ninjas of Love* is art-"

"Art!?" Weiss shouted. "You call that art?!"

His comment had the intended effect. The girls once again brought up the always-heated debate on whether or not Blake's books counted as literature, which, more importantly, meant that they left

him alone, forgetting about him and Cinder. They argued until the rest of his team arrived at the cafeteria and sat next to him.

"What did I miss?" Pyrrha said, taking her usual seat to his immediate left.

Yang opened her mouth to speak. Jaune stared at her. She stared right back. "Oh, nothing new. We were just discussing Blake's choice of reading again."

Pyrrha raised her eyebrows. "Really? Again?"

Yang shrugged. "Like I said, nothing new."

Jaune took a deep sigh of relief.

"Keep going, Jaune!" Pyrrha yelled, making her voice heard over the sound of Milo clashing against Jaune's shield.

Jaune kept his guard up, barely managing to stay on his feet. She kept up her assault, attempting to knock his shield away and leave him defenseless, but he wouldn't put it down. It was a smart strategy that he'd developed, wearing out his opponent by allowing them to attack and carefully choosing moments to strike back. Not good enough to beat her, but smart nonetheless.

Pyrrha brought her spear above her head, and as soon as she did, Jaune lunged after her, taking a wide swing with Crocea Mors. It would have been a brilliant move if he was faster, but all she had to do was step back to avoid it.

"Great thinking, but you weren't quite quick enough," she said, closing the distance in between them and stabbing at him. He tried bringing his shield back up, but Pyrrha hit him before he could, finally knocking him off balance and winning their spar.

Nora started cheering, but she drowned it out. Being famous and competing in front of thousands was a lot easier if you could block out all that noise without having to think about it.

Pyrrha stretched her hand out and helped Jaune up off of the floor. "That was an amazing fight, Jaune. You've been improving a ton recently. Just make a point to practice speed and you'll be a true huntsman in no time."

"Thanks, Pyrrha," he said, smiling.

That usually wouldn't have gotten her going like it did, but everything he did seemed to have that effect today. With her confession just a few hours away now, it was hard to focus on anything except him. Any other day, she'd have been able to dismantle him in a matter of seconds, but for the life of her she couldn't stop getting lost in those eyes.

Should she tell him that, or would that be weird? That wasn't weird, was it? Or did it depend on how she said that? Ugh, why did this have to be so hard!? She knew him so well; she shouldn't be having so much trouble thinking of something to say!

The two of them retreated to the edge of the training room while Nora and Ren squared up for their fight against each other.

"I really mean it when I say you've been improving, Jaune. The work you've been putting in is really starting to pay off."

Jaune beamed. "Thanks, but it's all because of you. Your teaching has helped out a ton."

Pyrrha had to avert her gaze to avoid letting him see her blush, not that he'd have noticed. "I'm just happy that I can be of some assistance."

The sound of Nora's hammer slamming against the ground took their attention back onto the ongoing fight. They watched as Ren

gracefully avoided his partner's attacks, weaving in between powerful swings and exploiting the few weaknesses in her defense.

"They're good huh?" Jaune turned to her and smiled. "Not as good as you, though."

Pyrrha managed to keep her cool on the outside, but on the inside, she was panicking.

Was that supposed to be a hint? Was he trying to say that he liked her, or was she reading too deep into it? Would he be upset if she tried to kiss him? Where had that last one even come from?! Of course he'd be upset!

Get yourself together, Pyrrha!

"T-thanks," she managed to squeak out.

It took a few more minutes, but eventually, Nora managed to take her partner down. Ren was evasive, but she only needed to hit him a handful of times to win the match. There was something to be said for power like her's.

Once Ren had gotten up, the four of them came together in the middle of the training room.

"That was awesome, guys," Jaune said, high fiving Nora and shaking Ren's hand. "At this rate, I'd say we've got a good shot at the Vytal Tournament."

His optimism alone was enough to lift her spirits. She couldn't remember the last time he'd spoken with so much confidence.

Nora crossed her arms and grinned. "Hell yeah! We're gonna kick so much ass!"

"If we stay consistent, that is," Ren said. "Everyone else is practicing just as much as we are, so we'll need to stay on schedule if we want to make it out of the first few rounds."

"You know, that reminds me of something really important!" Nora grabbed her partner by the wrist and winked at Pyrrha. "Me and Rennie need to go out into the hall and have a super secret, private conversation! You two should stay in here while we go do that. Bye!" With that, she ran off and out the door, leaving her alone with Jaune.

Pyrrha froze up as soon as she realized what was happening. Nora wanted her to confess. Right now.

Jaune looked at her with raised eyebrows. "I don't suppose you have any idea what that was all about?"

"N-nope," she said, shaking her head. "I-I guess we should probably just wait here until they come back."

Her partner shrugged his shoulders. "Fine by me."

She considered making a break for it, but Nora had made it clear on multiple occasions that if she tried that, she would take matters into her own hands. Not telling him would have the same consequence. Her fellow redhead had essentially trapped her. Pyrrha had no course of action except to tell him, right here and right now. That was certainly easier said than done, though.

She wanted to tell him, she really did, but she had no clue how! Everytime she tried to think of something to say, her mind came up completely empty.

Maybe she should just make it up as she went? That was probably what most normal people did, and besides, he'd probably appreciate it more if it sounded more genuine. But then how would she avoid messing it up?

"H-hey Jaune? Can we... talk about something?"

Why was she talking? She had clue what she even had to say yet!

"Yea, what's up, Pyr?"

Think of something quick!

...

...

...

"I really like your eyes."

Turns out, it was, in fact, a weird thing to say.

"Oh, thank you," Jaune said, acting as if that was somehow completely normal and expected. At least he wasn't adding on to her embarrassment.

"They're, um... really distracting."

Why on Remnant are you still going with this?!

Jaune frowned. "What?"

"N-nothing. Just forget I said any of that."

"Okay, then... Is that all you wanted to tell me?"

Maybe she should just back out now. He'd given her an easy out, and she wasn't exactly off to a great start. It might be better to try again at another time.

"Y-yeah, that's all."

"Alright, thanks, I guess," he said, turning towards the door.

You can't stop now, a small voice in the back of her head screamed, just loud enough for her to hear. If you don't do this now, when will you? Besides, Nora's going to make sure you follow through and you probably don't want to know what she'll do if you don't.

Pyrrha grabbed him by the wrist, stopping him in his tracks and making him look back at her in confusion. "Actually, that's not it. I... S-sorry, I don't really know how to say this."

Jaune smiled back, completely non-judgmentally. "It's fine, Pyrrha. You've got plenty of time to figure it out. I'm not going anywhere."

Alright, so he'd been fully understanding and somehow didn't feel weirded-out about her behavior, which was great, but that still didn't change the fact that she had no clue what to say. She'd tried thinking through it, but had drawn a blank, and making it up as she went along had made her sound creepy. What else was there to do?

Well, she supposed she could take Nora's advice and just be honest. She was hesitant to do that, though. For some reason, the idea just seemed so intimidating. She wasn't sure what it was, but something about saying what she was thinking was just so nerve-wracking. But did she have another choice? It wasn't like anything else was working.

"Jaune, can I be honest with you for a moment?"

Jaune frowned. "Something wrong, Pyr?"

"No, no, I just need to get something off my chest, that's all." Her partner looked at her, but said nothing, inviting her to keep going. "Listen, I... didn't have many friends growing up. It may sound silly to complain about being famous, but it did make it rather hard to form relationships, so my social life was... not the best." Jaune stared at her with sympathy. Oh Oum, she was actually doing this, wasn't she?

"I was lonely for a while. Honestly, I wanted nothing more than to be normal again. I still do. But you... you make me feel normal. In a good way." Pyrrha took a deep breath. "That's what I like about you. When I'm with you, I'm just Pyrrha. Not the 'Invincible Girl,' or some championship fighter, but a normal girl who doesn't have to put up some mask, because I know you want to see the real me and not a

media-trained celebrity. That's a great feeling, Jaune. Look, what I'm trying to say is that... I..."

Her words got caught in her throat. No fight had ever made her feel as nervous as she did now.

"I think of you as more than a friend." Her face turned a bright red as soon as the words left her mouth. Wanting to avoid looking him in the eye, she suddenly decided that the ground was very interesting. "In a romantic way, I mean. I like you romantically."

She expected some relief when she finally said it, but none came. That wasn't helped by the fact that he stood there, completely silent, for what felt like ages. Waiting for his response made her even more nervous.

"Oh..." he finally said, breaking the silence.

Pyrrha's stomach dropped. That was a no, wasn't it? It had to be. He didn't sound even close to being happy about it.

"I'm sorry, I..." Jaune cleared his throat. "Yesterday, Cinder asked me on a date, and I said yes."

And there it was. The killing blow. His words, as softly spoken as they were, came down on her like a hammer. She'd poured her heart out, but somebody else had beaten her to it. She'd been too scared, and she'd lost him because of it.

Her eyes began welling up. She felt his hand on her shoulder, and he was telling her something, likely in an attempt to comfort her, but it didn't register to her. All that registered was the crushing feeling his words had left behind.

Before she could think about what she was doing, she found herself running out the door, as if getting away from him would in turn help her get away from reality. Jaune called out to her but got no response.

She slammed the door open, nearly forcing it off the hinges. Nora, who'd been waiting right outside, stared at her with a look of optimism, oblivious to what had just happened.

"How did it-!" Seeing Pyrrha's face, she cut herself off, her own expression dropping into one of disappointment and sympathy. "Go..."

Pyrrha looked back for a fleeting second before burying her face in her arm to conceal the tears coming down her face and running off through the hallway. She didn't care who saw her or what they'd say, she just wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else. Anywhere but there.

She felt like such an idiot. She should've made sure he was available before throwing herself at him like that. It would have been as simple as asking, but somehow, the thought hadn't even occurred to her.

Her partner's words echoed in her head as Pyrrha walked swiftly down the hallway, hanging her head. She could barely make out the shape of the doorknob through the tears, but managed to open the door and slam it shut behind her nonetheless.

A day. That's how much that girl, Cinder, had beaten her by. If she'd listened to what Nora had been saying for months and taken the chance just one day earlier, things could have gone differently. Maybe he'd have even said yes. Instead, she currently sat crying on her bed, burying her face in her hands, and probably looking rather pathetic. That's certainly how she felt, anyway.

Pyrrha stayed like that for some amount of time, she wasn't sure how long. It could've been minutes, could've been hours, she had no clue. It wouldn't have made a difference either way. She didn't even bother moving until Nora knocked on the door and walked in.

Most of the time, she'd come in making about as much noise as a huntress-in-training could, which was a lot, but now, she entered

almost noiselessly. It would've been strange if not for what had just happened. Hell, with how hard the girl had rooted for her to get with Jaune, Pyrrha was surprised she didn't break down with her.

"Hey," Nora said, shutting the door behind her. "Are you alright?" Shaking her head, she took a seat next to her. "Oh, what am I talking about, of course you're not. Listen, I'm sorry about what happened. I shouldn't have pressured you into telling him as much as I did. That was stupid of me."

"I-it's not your fault," Pyrrha choked out.

"Whether or not that's true, it still really sucks to see you like this." Nora put her arm around her shoulder and offered her a tissue, which she accepted wordlessly. "Jaune wanted to come over here to comfort you, but I told him you probably didn't want to see him right now."

She'd stopped crying now, and the dull, almost numb pang of sadness that came after the initial pain had begun to settle in. "Thanks," she said weakly.

Nora sighed. "Girl, you are a mess."

"I know. I-I'm sorry you have to deal with all this."

"Don't apologize. I'm your friend, and that's what friends do. And hey, it'll be alright. Somehow, things will work out. You just have to give it a little time, that's all."

Pyrrha didn't think she'd ever met someone as optimistic as Nora. It was probably because she'd grown up an orphan, all alone in the world outside her friendship with Ren. Hope would've been an invaluable asset to her. Whatever the case, it was that source of optimism that she didn't think she could do without. Especially right now.

Cinder listened intently as Mercury recited an escape route he'd found for the Vytal Tournament. Not for herself, of course, but for Jaune. She was determined to prioritize his safety in the ordeal, even if that meant changing her plans.

"From there, I can take him down the tunnel to the exit, where they'll be running bullheads down to Beacon and the city," he said, pointing to lines drawn on a small map in front of him. "After that, things get complicated."

"We'll figure it out. We've got months to do so. Besides, as soon as I get the maiden powers, I'll be right there to assist him." Cinder took her eyes off the table and looked up at him. "I'm sure you'll be able to protect him until then."

Mercury stood stiff. "That's not really the part I'm worried about."

"Oh?" she said, raising her eyebrow. "What, then, are your concerns?"

"Look, I've got no problem memorizing all these routes, but how am I going to actually get him to follow me? Won't he be more interested in, you know... helping? And why would he even trust me?"

Cinder leaned forward. "If he wants to help, you can tell him that more people need him in the city. You won't even be lying to him. As for trust, you'll need to build a friendship with him beforehand. That way, he should have no problem following you."

"You want me to become friends with him?" He spoke almost skeptically, like he didn't believe she was being serious.

"I do believe we've discussed this before," she said, leaning back in her chair, "Or have you already forgotten about your orders? I haven't given you anything else to do. Surely, one mere task isn't too much for you to handle?"

"Alright, alright, I'll get on it. Just give me some time, it's not like I can just walk up at him at any random moment."

A scowl made its way onto Cinder's face. His ill manners, bordering on outright disrespect, was starting to get very, very old. In all honesty, she'd have considered getting rid of him by now if he wasn't such a valuable asset. At least he was starting to take Jaune's safety seriously. Or perhaps he just feared for himself, but she didn't care either way. The result would be the same.

"And why not?" she said, glaring at him. "That's exactly what I did, and quite frankly, it worked out just fine for me."

Mercury took a sharp breath in. "I just thought that it'd be better if I stayed back for a bit so he wouldn't think I was trying to force a friendship with him."

"You clearly aren't very good at thinking, then. Perhaps you should stop doing that and start doing what I tell you to." Cinder pushed the map back towards her underling, signaling for him to collect it. "I expect you to have talked to him by tomorrow. If I speak to you at the end of the day and you can't tell me exactly how your conversation with him went, you can expect consequences."

Without a word, Mercury reached over the table to collect the paper, stuffed it into his pocket and walked out the room, leaving her totally alone. As soon as he closed the door, a wide smile made its way onto Cinder's face.

She'd had to appear irritable while dealing with him and his partner to keep them in line, but underneath her cold surface, she really couldn't have been happier. Her night with Jaune had been replaying in her head over and over again.

Thinking about it made her body heat up. The fact that they were together now almost seemed too good to be true, like a good dream that never ended. That was fitting, considering how often he appeared to her while she slept.

It was honestly unbelievable how far she'd come in such a short amount of time. Just a few months ago, she'd had no idea where he was, and every lead she got led nowhere. Now, he belonged to her. No longer would she have to imagine a life with him, daydreaming for hours on end only to snap back to the reality that he wasn't there with her. Those days were over.

For once, she saw both a bright future and a bright present, and all she had to do to keep it that way was make sure he was happy. Perhaps for the first time ever in her life, she could just enjoy herself.

Chapter 11

Chapter 10

Jaune sat down with a sigh, closing his eyes as he leaned back on the wooden bench, resting his hands on his knees. The day was windless and dull, without so much as a bird chirping to fill the empty space that enveloped the courtyard.

Man, just when it all seemed to be looking up...

Only one day earlier, everything had seemed so promising. He'd even gotten a date! Except now that was the problem, wasn't it? He was scheduled to go out with Cinder, but then Pyrrha wanted the same thing and he'd had to tell her no.

It wasn't that he'd rather have gone out with Pyrrha, but denying her like that had obviously made her upset, and he hated seeing her like that. Especially because he knew it was his own fault.

So now he had to find a way to fix this whole thing. He couldn't exactly leave it alone and hope for it to fix itself, that would probably just make it worse. Somehow, he needed to let Pyrrha know that they were still best friends and that he had no intentions of changing that anytime soon.

For now, though, she probably just needed some space. If the same thing happened to him, the last thing he'd want would be for the person rejecting him to come up and pester him immediately afterward. He'd at least need a bit of time.

But what if she thought he was ignoring her? Refusing to have a conversation might make it seem like he didn't want anything to do with her after that. He didn't want Pyrrha to think that she'd just ruined their friendship.

He really had no clue what to do. You'd think he'd be better at this kind of thing, growing up with seven sisters like he did.

"Oum, I don't think I'll ever understand women..."

"Right with you there."

Jaune jumped at the sudden response. Turning to his right, he saw a familiar face sitting next to him on the other side of the bench, the guy from Cinder's team. What was his name again? Michael? Mercury? something?

"Oh, hey... Sorry, I didn't see you there. Matthew, was it?" he guessed.

"Mercury."

"Ah, now I remember."

"So... What's got you all heavy-hearted? Problems with the ladies, I take it?"

Jaune laughed bitterly. "Yup, hit the nail right on the head there."

"Tell me about it," he said, rolling his eyes. "Everytime I think I've got it all figured out, they gotta go and make things more complicated. This one girl on my team-" Mercury looked around, as if to make sure nobody was watching them. "-crazy, man. Plain crazy. So, anyway-"

"You mean Cinder?" he asked, cutting in on his rant.

The boy paused for a second before continuing. "Uh... no. No, actually. I'm talking about someone else. Her name's..." Mercury leaned back and let out a sigh. "You know what? You don't wanna hear about all that. Too personal. Anyway, what's going on with you?"

"What's going on with me?"

"Yeah, man. What's got you sitting here all depressed?"

Jaune sighed. "My friend wants something from me that I can't give to her. I just feel bad that I can't make her happy."

"What, she like you or somethin'?"

He didn't respond.

For the first time in their conversation, Mercury looked over to him, his eyebrows raised. "Well, shit," he said, taking his silence as confirmation. "That's quite the situation you're in. Can't say I envy you."

"Believe me, I know. Never thought I'd ever be upset about someone liking me like that, but here I am," he said, laughing.

Mercury looked around again for a second before reaching over and putting his hand on his shoulder, making him stop. "Listen, man. I know you've got something going on with Cinder now, and I gotta warn you, she can be a bit... crazy, if you wanna put it like that."

Jaune sat there, speechless. He really wasn't sure how he was supposed to respond. Thank him? Defend her? "Oh... okay then?"

"Look, I'm just trying to look out for you. If she finds out your friend's into you, she's gonna make a whole thing out of it, and trust me, you really don't want her to do that. I've gotten wrapped up in her drama before, and it's not pretty."

Jaune thought over what he was saying. Surely, it couldn't be that bad, right? He'd understand if Cinder was his girlfriend, but they hadn't even gone on one date yet, just agreed to. Would she really care that much about Pyrrha's feelings?

"Alrighty then," he said, laughing awkwardly. "Thanks for the warning, I guess?"

"Yeah, no problem. Just be smart and keep her happy. I gotta live with her for the time being, and I don't like dealing with her when she's upset." Silence took over for a short moment. "Anyway... Vytal festival isn't too far from now, is it?"

"It certainly feels close," Jaune said, grateful for the change in topic. "Cinder seems to have a lot of confidence in you guys' team. You feel the same way?"

Mercury shrugged. "I think things will go well for us. How about you?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I'm not really worried about how the rest of my team will do, but I can't help but feel like I'm going to mess it all up." Jaune chuckled. "But you're not here to listen to some loser's problems, are you?"

"Nah, I get it. Believe me, we're all stressing, not just you."

"You certainly don't seem to be," he said, more as a joke than anything.

Mercury rolled his eyes. "That's probably because I don't go around telling everyone that I'm worried."

Jaune sank into the bench and sighed. "Yeah, I get it."

"I'm kidding, man," he said, laughing. It sounded forced, like someone was holding him at gunpoint and telling him what to do. "Just a joke." Once again, Mercury glanced around, as if he expected something to be there. Why'd he keep doing that, anyways? "You know, if you're unsure about it, I can always help you out a bit with training."

"Oh, well, I've got a full schedule right now, but maybe if I get some free time I'll let you know."

Mercury shrugged. "Feel free to ask." Taking out his scroll, he checked the time and got up off the bench. "Whelp, I should probably get going. Team meeting, can't keep 'em waiting again. See you around."

"Yeah, see you."

Once he'd left, Jaune considered what he'd said.

It was certainly a bit strange that he felt the need to warn him about Cinder being "crazy." He just couldn't imagine that she'd get that upset over Pyrrha's feelings if she figured them out, especially considering how short a time they'd known each other. She seemed a little more easy-going than that.

In any case, he certainly *hoped* it wouldn't bother her. Pyrrha's confession would likely end up making things complicated enough, and he really didn't need anything extra on top of that.

He was probably just getting ahead of himself, though. Cinder hadn't given any indication that she'd get mad over his relationship with Pyrrha, and the only reason he had to believe she would was her teammate saying so. Heck, he didn't even know this guy.

For now, if he wanted to fix this whole thing, he had to be careful about it.

Mercury whistled to himself as he made his way back to their dorm, walking purposefully but not too quickly. He wasn't in a huge rush to talk to Cinder about her boy toy.

Seriously, what was so special about this dude? The way she talked about him, he half expected the heavens themselves to open up in his presence, but he was just some guy. Even by civilian standards, he didn't really stick out at all. He was just... average. Who knew how he had Nikos and Cinder both going after him. Whatever the case, the guy was about to get wrapped up in a real shitty situation.

He didn't plan on saying any of that to Cinder, though. No sir, he preferred his organs intact and inside his body, thank you very much.

His boss looked up at him as soon as he opened the door. "How'd it go?" she asked, straight to business as usual.

Mercury shrugged. "It was fine. Not like we're best friends, but we're not strangers anymore."

"And what did you discuss?"

"The Vytal tournament. Y'know, how we're feeling about it, stuff like that. Nothing all that exciting."

"Right," she said, nodding along. "And how does he feel? He isn't too nervous about it, is he?"

Yeesh. He didn't think she'd ever shown this much concern for him or Emerald.

"He seems a little anxious, I guess. It's not like he's having a breakdown or anything, though. He'll be fine."

Cinder looked at him expectantly. "Well? Did you not comfort him?"

Mercury raised his eyebrows. He was supposed to *comfort* him? What was he, his therapist? He supposed he could add that to the list, right after "body guard."

Did he really want to tell Cinder that he'd done nothing, though? Come to think of it, he technically had comforted him. It had been really basic and empty, just telling him that he wasn't the only nervous one, but it wouldn't be a lie to say he had.

"Yeah, I reassured him and everything. He felt a lot better by the end of it."

"Good. I'm glad you're finally starting to understand your role." Cinder leaned back and stared off into space, smiling. "Oum, isn't he

dreamy?"

Mercury went over to his desk and began sifting through its contents, taking out a few items to go out into the city with, his latest excuse for getting away from Emerald and Cinder. When he turned back, his boss lay in the same spot, scowling at him.

"Well?" she said, narrowing her eyes.

Mercury froze in place. "Well, what?"

"Is he not dreamy?"

He would have laughed if she didn't have the power to wipe him off the face of Remnant. She couldn't actually be serious, right?

"I, ah..." Mercury cleared his throat. "He's great."

Cinder's scowl deepened. "That doesn't answer my question, now does it?"

She had to be trying to humiliate him. There was just no way she genuinely wanted him to call him "dreamy" like some lovestruck teenage girl.

"Are you... being serious?"

He spoke without thinking, and if her facial expression was anything to go off of, she didn't like the result. Her scowl grew into clear anger.

"What tells you I'm not being serious, Mercury?" she growled.

"Nothing! You see, what I meant to say was yes, he is quite dreamy. I totally agree with you there." He put on a fake smile, trying to push himself through... whatever this was.

Cinder seemed to calm down, relaxing and leaning back again.

"Good. I'm glad we can agree on that."

Oum take me now.

Pyrrha opened the door as quietly as she could, trying her best not to be heard. As soon as she'd opened it wide enough, she poked her head in and took a quick look around. Nobody was inside.

Drawing a breath of relief, she walked into her dorm and took a seat at her desk. She wasn't trying to avoid anyone, per say, she just didn't want to talk right now, that was all. It would be uncomfortable, and she clearly wasn't all that great at discussing her feelings.

Taking a book off the shelf, she set it down and opened it, hoping to use schoolwork to distract herself. It wasn't exactly enjoyable, but she needed some way to take her mind off things.

Her workflow was almost instantly interrupted by the door slamming open. She didn't have to turn around to know who was there. Only Nora could manage to make something as simple as entering a room so loud.

"Pyrrha! What are you doing in here? Aren't you usually training at this time?"

"Yes," she said, hesitantly. "Usually, I would be."

Nora walked up next to her and stood over her. "This is about Jaune, isn't it?" Pyrrha said nothing. "Look, I understand that you're upset, but you've got to talk to him! Locking yourself up in our room all day isn't going to get you anywhere."

"I know," she said, sighing, "But he probably doesn't want to see me right now anyway. I can't just... go up there with him like nothing happened."

"You two are best friends, Pyrrha! Dating or not, what you have with him is special, and I think he'd agree. He doesn't see you as anything less because of what you've told him. Just sit down and talk

to him about it! I know it'll be hard, but you can't throw away your friendship because of this."

"I *know*, but that's not the point! Look, I just... I just..." Tears began forming in her eyes. "I just can't right now. I'd get all emotional. I can barely even keep it together now as it is."

Nora looked at her with sympathy. "I guess if you're not ready, you're not ready. Just try not to wait too long, okay? Like I said, what you two have is special. It's worth fighting for."

Pyrrha nodded and buried her face in the palms of her hands, trying to hide her tears as if doing so would shut out her dejection.

"You know what? I'll get Team RWBY and we can talk about this together! You can get all this off your chest and they can help you through it all, and I'm sure-"

"No!" Pyrrha snapped. Her teammate jumped in surprise. "S-sorry. I don't need you to do that right now. I don't want them to see me like this."

She felt Nora's gaze linger on her for a few seconds before she turned away. "Well, I can't make you do anything, but if you want to talk about it, we're all here for you. You're lucky to have such great friends like me," she joked. On a better day, Pyrrha would've laughed.

"Thanks," she choked out.

Nora suddenly grinned and stood up taller, puffing her chest out. "You know what? I *can* make you do something! This weekend, we're going to go get ice cream and I'm going to convince you to settle this whole thing with Jaune. A classic post-heartbreak outing you can't say no to!"

Pyrrha leaned back in her chair, letting out a shaky breath. "O-okay, if you think it'll help..."

She mostly said it to get her off her back. When Nora made a declaration like that, she usually meant it. It would be nearly impossible to talk her down.

Part of her, though, thought she might need it. She might have not liked to admit it, but Nora was right. She couldn't just sit around all day. At some point, she'd need to have a conversation with Jaune, and maybe talking to Nora first would make it easier.

"See? Was that so hard?" she said triumphantly, smiling ear to ear. "Trust me, by the time I'm through with you, you'll be perfectly prepared to sort this whole thing out."

Pyrrha nodded, the tears having mostly stopped by now. "Okay..."

The clicking of her shoes echoed throughout the warehouse as Cinder walked to her next meeting. The only thing occupying the building was a seemingly endless amount of cardboard boxes filled to the brim with dust and weaponry. The paint, having been mostly peeled back to reveal the brick underneath, made it about as unwelcoming as it could be. Still, the dull atmosphere did nothing to deter her.

Moving further into the warehouse, she saw a large, burly man wearing a white fang mask passed out among the stacks of boxes, clutching a bottle of alcohol. Her scowl deepened. Was Adam truly this incompetent with his recruitment? It seemed to her as though all the manpower he provided turned out useless, or at the very least, severely unhelpful. It frustrated her to no end, and the promises only exasperated that.

If the people the White Fang had working for them were half as good as he said they were, she'd already be a maiden by now. The same went for Roman and his men.

Speaking of Roman, he stood at the very back of the building, staring at a large screen in front of him with a cigar in between his

teeth. Neo sat on a table off to the side, her legs dangling as she watched her approach with a smirk on her face. Her partner, on the other hand, still didn't even seem to notice her coming, too busy with whatever he had on the screen.

"I trust this isn't all that you've managed to get your hands on," she said, grabbing his attention. "If so, you've got work to do."

Roman froze before turning around to face her. "Good to see you too, Cinder." Seeing the look on her face, he quickly moved on. "Of course this isn't all I've got. I have other locations. What kind of criminal mastermind would I be if I put everything in one place?"

Cinder crossed her arms, unimpressed. "You're going to need more."

"I already told you I have other locations."

"Well, I'm telling you that you're going to need more," she said, dismissing him. "This isn't one of your silly bank heists, Roman. We're talking about Beacon. About Vale."

"What, you think I don't know what we're doing here? You've only told us a million times." Roman took a puff of his cigar and pulled it out of his mouth, holding it between his fingers. "At least we're finally getting a move on with it instead of waiting around all day like we were before."

"Maybe instead of 'waiting around all day,' you could have taken the opportunity to make yourself useful and do your job. Instead, you're racing around the city all day playing catch-up. You do realize what happens when you show your face as frequently as you are right now, Roman? You get caught. I assume you don't want that."

"Course not," he said, putting the cigar back in his mouth, "Wouldn't want your grand plans to fail."

"Believe me, I don't need you for this. You just happen to have a bit of a reputation, and if it weren't for that, I would have never had any

reason to seek you out. At the end of the day, you are replaceable." Cinder paused to look him in the eye. "Exposable, even."

Roman turned away from her, trying not to let her see the look of agitation on his face. "Alright. I'll get more dust, just give me a little bit of time, will ya? Can't go out everyday with all these cops around."

Cinder looked over towards Neo, her real reason for coming. She kept staring at her with that same smirk on her face, as if to mock her. As if to say, *I know your secret. I know what you're hiding.* Her hands balled into fists as she glared back at her.

The fact that she needed her was the worst part. The little devil was too valuable a piece to sacrifice - for now, at least. Once she'd taken down Vale and become a maiden, that might end up not being the case. Perhaps then she could deal with her. Test out her new powers while she was at it, too.

"I've given you plenty of time, Roman, and I can't offer you much more of it, so you'd better make good use of what you have left."

"Look, I've made plenty good use of it so far, so why don't you let me continue to do that without all these confrontations, huh?"

Cinder paused, glaring at him. The silence hung thick in the air. "Fine," she said, finally breaking it. "But don't think I'm done supervising you." Turning back to his little helper, the girl sat in the same position, giving her the same look. *I know something you don't want me to know.* "How much longer do you need her?"

"Depends on how bad you need that dust," Roman said, annoyed. "If it's as urgent as you say it is, I'll need her around for another month at least."

"She comes to Beacon by the end of this week."

Roman looked over at her. "I just told you-"

Cinder shut him down before he could finish the thought. "I know what you said, and I'm saying that Neo will be at Beacon by the end of this week."

The self-proclaimed 'criminal mastermind' furrowed his brow and gave her a death stare that she couldn't imagine actually intimidated anyone. "Fine. She'll be there."

"Keep yourself in line," she said, turning around and walking towards the exit. "I don't need to tell you what will happen if you don't." On her way back, she saw the same White-Fang grunt, laying in the same position he'd been in a few minutes prior. "Oh, and by the way, Roman," she called out, not bothering to stop, "You really ought to take the trash out more often. It might do you some good."

She heard footsteps follow behind her, and some shouting, before finally leaving and shutting the door behind her. Hopefully, he'd get rid of the man like she'd told him to.

As usual, she loathed having to deal with the "gentleman thief," but as far as their meetings usually went, this one hadn't been too bad. For one thing, Roman didn't seem to know about Jaune. If he had, he'd have tried to use it as leverage, or at the very least hold it over her head. The bigger news, though, was that Neo would be coming to Beacon, where she could keep an eye on her.

She was just too unpredictable to be left alone with the kind of knowledge she had. The only thing she could rely on was that Neo wasn't stupid enough to try hurting him at a huntsman academy, hence bringing her there early.

In all honesty, Cinder found her difficult to deal with. Perhaps it was only because of her inability to speak, but the girl did a much better job at hiding her intentions than anyone else she'd met, and that made controlling her an issue.

If the circumstances were different, that might've been one of her top priorities, but once all her plans were complete, Neo was irrelevant.

She held no long term importance, thus she had no need of a long term solution. Jaune and her plans for Beacon, on the other hand, required attention. Attention that she couldn't waste by coming out to a different part of the city every night to meet her and Roman. No when she had to plan her date.

Some might assume that arranging such a thing would be easy, but those people had clearly never had to do so with as much on the line as Cinder did. Their future together rested on her ability to make Jaune happy, and that meant putting more than a little care into it, unless she wanted to see him move on and find someone else.

Hell, she already had competition with Nikos. She was probably waiting right by him, ready to pounce at the slightest mistake. The second Cinder slipped up, she'd be right there to "comfort" him. That bitch.

Well, Cinder did not plan on slipping up. He belonged to her. It had always been that way, and it would stay that way forever, whatever it would take.

Chapter 12

Cinder stared across the table, taking in the sight that lay in front of her. Jaune, dashing as usual, looked back, his presence brightening the room and warming her soul. It was almost enough to put tears in her eyes.

Perhaps it was just the environment or the fact that they were finally, *finally* together, but somehow, he looked even better now than usual. The candlelight gave his golden hair a certain glow and highlighted the blue in his eyes, giving him an angelic presence. And who's to say he wasn't just that?

She'd decided that was the perfect way to describe him. Her little blonde angel.

"How are you feeling about the Vytal Festival? Mercury said you were a little nervous. You're not too stressed out about it, are you?"

"Oh, I'll be fine," he said, waving it off. "I'm nervous, yeah, but I'm sure everyone else is, too. It's just a matter of practicing and building confidence."

"Well, if you ever need someone to talk to about it, I'm here for you."

Jaune smiled at her. "I appreciate that."

Cinder's heart fluttered. Things were off to a great start.

"So..." Jaune leaned forward towards her. "You and Mercury get along well, I take it?"

"We're not involved," Cinder said, almost cutting him off with how quickly she responded. "If that is what you were asking."

"What?" he said, confused. "You are teammates though, aren't you?"

"I mean romantically. There's nothing between us beyond being on the same team."

Jaune scratched at the back of his head. "That's... not exactly what I was asking, but I guess that's good to know, too."

"O-oh, of course," she said, flustered. That didn't make it seem like she had something to hide from him, did it? "What was your question, then?"

"I was just wondering about your friends. I don't think I've ever heard you talk about them before."

Cinder cleared her throat. "Well, there's Mercury, obviously. He's..." She found herself drawing a blank. Nobody had ever asked about her "friends" before, mostly because they weren't actually her friends. She couldn't just tell him that, though. What would he think about her if she couldn't even make friends with her own teammates? "Nice."

She had to do her best not to cringe at herself.

Looking back, Cinder realized that she'd never really had a need for real, genuine social skills beyond simple diplomacy, at least not until she and Jaune had finally been reunited. Faking it had worked out when needed, but at the end of the day, "friends" weren't really a part of her life. It really was a miracle that she'd done so well with Jaune thus far.

"He can be a bit reckless, but I suppose he's good to have around."

"Yeah? What about your other teammates?"

Cinder paused, trying to find the right words. "They're fine. Emerald is reliable, but certainly clingy. Overly attached, if you will."

That particular detail might end up becoming an issue. Emerald, when and if Cinder told her about Jaune, would probably get jealous,

and she wasn't sure she could tolerate that kind of attitude towards him.

"Mint is... difficult. To give you some advice, I suggest you keep your distance. She's hard to trust."

Jaune nodded along, looking off to the side. Cinder's heart dropped.

You're clearly making him uncomfortable! He's not here because he wants to hear you trash the people who are supposed to be your friends!

"I-I'm sorry," she said, flustered, "I shouldn't be complaining to you like this. We should be having fun together."

Jaune looked her in the eye again and smiled. "It's fine, Cinder. No harm done."

His smile was enough to calm her down. Just like that, everything was perfect again. That feeling of serenity washed back over her and the candlelight seemed to glow brighter in his face. Oum, that smile...

She would kill just for a chance to get a glimpse of it. She *had* killed for it. If only she could tell him all she'd done for him, all of her feelings.

No, not now. At least not to the full extent of things. It would be too much. Too much, too soon. One day, he'd love her enough to accept all of it, maybe even be grateful for it, but that day lay in the future.

Besides, how would she even *begin* to communicate her feelings? What she had for him went beyond simple emotion. It just couldn't be expressed by words. It would be like sitting under the sky and trying to count the stars.

Cinder leaned her head against her arm. "You look so great in that outfit."

"Thanks," he said, his face tinted a light shade of red as he glanced from the table to her, like he wasn't sure which to look at. "Same to you."

Her heart stopped for a second, freezing her up. "I-I'm so glad you like it." The words came out shaky with excitement.

She really was relieved. Selecting the dress hadn't been easy, afterall.

"It's not the dress I like."

Her soul seemed to leave her body for a second. His words might've come across as suggestive if everything about him wasn't so pure, although she really wanted to believe that he meant something more by it.

Did he? Was he trying to imply something? What if he wanted to take things further and she didn't realize? She should say something. She could be missing out on the biggest opportunity of her life if she didn't!

"So, Jaune..." Cinder leaned a little closer to him.

"Thank you for dining with us, what can I get you started with today?"

Cinder looked over to the waitress, scowling. Couldn't she see that she was having a genuine moment with her beloved? The *nerve* to just walk up and interrupt them like that! "We haven't decided on anything yet."

"And you?" the waitress said, turning to Jaune.

Her scowl deepened. "I just told you-"

"I'm just fine for right now, thank you though," he said, giving the waitress a polite smile that she reciprocated before walking off. Cinder's eye twitched. What was she smiling at him for?

"As I was saying," Cinder composed herself, sitting up straight and looking him in the eye, "I was wondering if you're still free after this. I know your team may want you back before late, but I'd love to spend some extra time with you."

Jaune shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

"Great! Why don't you come back to my dorm and we can-" Cinder cut herself off. "Keep each other company."

"Yeah, that sounds fun."

He spoke with the same chaste smile, just how he did when she had first tried asking him out. When he hadn't really known what she wanted. Oh well, even if he didn't understand now, he would once she made her move. Anticipation arose in her chest.

"Great! Lovely! Amazing, even!"

"We won't be disturbing the rest of your team though, will we? I don't want to bother anyone."

"My team? Of course not," she said, waiving the idea off. "I'll tell them to leave. They're not important. You are."

Jaune looked taken aback. "Oh..."

The two of them sat there in silence for a few seconds, Cinder staring steadfast into his eyes and Jaune glancing around the restaurant.

"Sorry, this might be awkward," he said, meeting her gaze with a look of sympathy, "But you don't really... get along with your teammates, do you?" Seeing her frown, he quickly tried to drop the subject. "Sorry, that was dumb, I didn't mean to-"

"No, no, it's alright." Cinder sighed exaggeratedly. "You're correct, I suppose. My teammates are fine, but as I said, they're little more than that. That's why I'm so glad I found you," she said, reaching

over the table and taking his hands in her's. They were sturdy, but smooth. "You can give me so much more than they can."

She felt his fingers tense up. "You seem really sure about that."

Cinder tightened her grip. "I am. You can really make me happy, Jaune. We can make each other happy. That's all I really want."

Her soulmate pulled away just a bit, leaning back in his chair. His mouth hung slightly open. "I... Well, that's heavy..."

"Look, I don't mean to put anything on you, I just..." Cinder's voice softened. "I've been lonely for a while, and you make that go away."

Jaune's gaze, full of empathy but only a little understanding, felt like a warm embrace. "Listen..." She felt his hands relax as he leaned back in. "I can't pretend like I know what you've been through, Cinder, but just know that I'm going to do whatever I can to be there for you."

Again, tears threatened to spill from her eyes. She couldn't bring herself to do anything but stare at him through vision that was quickly becoming blurry.

"I... Thank you, I..." Words she couldn't force out lodged themselves in her throat, blocking her voice. He only made it worse when he took his hands out of hers and wrapped his arms around her, leaning over the table to give her an awkward, but very much sincere, hug.

She'd never really felt him like this. Wearing his hoodie and holding his hand could only do so much for her, but this... this really did complete her. There was something so sweet and innocent in it. In all her years of yearning and fantasizing, she'd never imagined that he could make the world feel as pure as it did now.

Even as he pulled away, instead of leaving her feeling empty like she might have expected, Cinder was left with a lingering warmth and wholeness, as if his hold had given her something she'd been

missing her whole life. Still, though, she preferred he stayed wrapped around her.

Her voice failed her completely this time. All she could do was stare up at him, her mouth hanging open and slowly forming into a passionate smile.

"Have you all decided on anything yet?"

Cinder, much to her chagrin, was snapped out of her daze by the waitress coming back for their orders. Her smile dropped back into a frown. Jaune's eyes lingered for a second longer, staying fixed on her while he turned his head before finally looking towards the waitress.

Her impatience grew as they continued to talk. She tried her best not to show it, but this waitress was really starting to bother her, interrupting them like this. Was it not obvious that they were sharing a moment of intimacy, or was she doing it on purpose?

Cinder eyed the girl suspiciously. Perhaps she was just being paranoid, but she would have to be to have any hope of keeping him. Couldn't allow anyone else to sneak their way in.

Once the waitress left, the two of them sat there in silence, unsure of what to say to each other. Cinder propped her head up on her arm with a smile, leaning her cheek against the palm of her hand with a slight tilt. Jaune, maybe not seeing the silence quite as romantically as she did, looked down at the table, his mouth curved upward ever so slightly.

After a moment or two, her beloved directed his vision back up at her and leaned back in his chair. "What made you want to be a huntress?"

The question took her off guard. She froze, holding a glass an inch away from her lips, having been in the motion of drinking from it. "Why do you ask?"

Jaune shrugged. "Just a conversation starter, I guess. Get to know you a little better and whatnot."

That made sense, she supposed. Given how much she knew about him, it was easy to forget that he didn't necessarily know her quite so well. It still felt a bit strange, too, that she'd poured out so much emotion to him and he was still asking such simple questions.

Cinder laid the glass back down on the table. "Well..." she bit at her fingernail and glanced around the room, suddenly getting nervous. "I..."

She tried to think of a quick, easy answer, but somehow, that seemed much harder than usual. It occurred to her how strange it was that she'd done so much off the back of lies, yet now, with her Jaune right across from her, lying just didn't come as naturally as it always had. In any case, she couldn't say nothing.

"I wanted to... help people. The world's a dangerous place, and I thought I could provide some safety. Protect the people who aren't capable of protecting themselves."

Jaune smiled, calming her nerves. "The world could use more people like you. You're certainly making my own reasons seem silly."

Cinder faced conflicting emotions. On the one hand, a compliment from her to-be lover always made her giddy. On the other, it felt criminal to be placed above him like that.

"And what might those reasons be? I'm sure they're just as good as mine."

Jaune looked off to the side as if he was embarrassed. "I wanted to be a hero. My ancestors were huntsmen, so I entered Beacon thinking I could be like them. Looking back, I might have been a bit in over my head, but I guess it's all working out," he said, smiling.

She looked at him, dead serious. "That's not a bad reason, Jaune. We all need purpose."

Jaune seemed to consider that for a few seconds, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that we all have something that we live for. Purpose. An end goal." Cinder never took his eyes off of him. "It's part of who we are. If you don't have purpose, why bother with anything? We all have the right to chase our goals, and if your end goal is to be a hero, who has the right to tell you that you can't chase after that?"

Jaune paused again and stared off into space. "And do you know your purpose?"

"Yes," she answered, "And I've never stopped chasing it."

"Has that worked out for you?"

"Just as much as I dreamed it would."

Another silence fell between them. Even now, while they sat there speechless, the clinking of plates and low chatter that enveloped the building failed to break through and come to her attention.

"So are you gonna tell me what it is or just leave me guessing?"
Jaune said, amused.

"One day, darling," she said, smirking at him and bringing the glass up to her lips. Her lover laughed.

Cinder could've choked on her emotion. Seeing him feel such joy and knowing that *she* was responsible just melted her heart.

The waitress eventually came back with their food, and although she tried to tell her off with a glare, she ignored her either out of ignorance or a desire to keep her job. As for the rest of their time at the restaurant, it was possibly the greatest experience of her life, and that bar kept getting higher and higher since she found him.

Perhaps the best part, though, was when he let her hold his hand walking out. Finally, they had begun to establish a physical connection to their emotional one, and if she played her cards right, that connection would fully blossom by the end of the night.

"Are you still okay to come back to my dorm, then?"

"Sure, why not?"

Her smile couldn't have gotten wider. She'd have to get rid of Emerald and Mercury, of course, but that could be arranged with a word. After that, they'd be free to do whatever they wanted in privacy, away from the ever-attentive eyes of their teams.

She couldn't wait.

All things considered, Jaune was pretty happy with how things were going right now. After all, getting a date was no easy task, or at least not judging by his experience.

Looking back, he really had no clue how he ended up here. Months of pining after Weiss and flirting with who knows how many other girls got him nowhere, but somehow he managed to stumble his way into going out with Cinder. He certainly wasn't complaining, though.

Was the date a little awkward? Sure. But it hadn't been bad.

She was nice, seemed to really like him, too. Maybe there was something a little intimidating about her, and she may have been a bit emotional, but did he really care enough about that to ruin this? Nope. Not him. This might've been the best chance he'd ever had with any girl, no way he'd break things off this soon because of something as trivial as that.

So yeah, no matter how aggressively Cinder was pulling him through the halls, he was smart enough not to ask questions, even if he did have multiple.

"Don't worry, my teammates should have cleared out now," Cinder said, "We'll have plenty of privacy. Nobody to disturb us."

Wow, she must really like spending time with him. He'd really gotten lucky, huh?

Cinder opened the door and pulled him into her dorm. "I'm so glad you decided to come back with me. I'm sure it'll be a great time."

Jaune took a look around the room. She clearly kept it neat, because it looked damn near unused. Almost nothing was left lying around like you might find in JNPR's, and the things that were had been neatly organized.

He stood around for a second, not entirely sure what he was supposed to do.

Cinder sat down on the edge of her bed and motioned for him to join her. "Why don't you take a seat? You'll be more comfortable."

Listening to her instruction, he sat next to her, close but not too close. She quickly closed the distance, shifting over so that their shoulders rubbed together. He tried to be respectful and act like he didn't notice.

"I had a good time tonight. A really great one," she said.

"Yeah, it was fun. Thanks for planning all this, by the way."

"I was happy to, Jaune." Cinder turned her body so her chest was pressed up against her arm and their faces stood centimeters apart. He could feel her breath against him. "I loved every second of it."

The nerves finally got to him when he realized how close they were. He tried to look away, but Cinder wasn't having it, using her hand to pull his face back towards hers.

"You loved it, too, right?" Cinder looked him deep, very deep, in the eyes. Deep enough that he could see his reflection in her pupils.

"Didn't you, Jaune?"

"Uh, yeah..." Jaune smiled nervously, off put. "Of course I did."

Cinder kept staring for a second before suddenly pulling him into a hug, her grip strong enough to constrict his breathing. He flinched at a faint, wet sensation against the edge of his ear before it occurred to him that she was touching her lips against it.

"That makes me so happy," she said, her voice shaking. He tried to respond, but the pressure from her bearhug stopped him and all he could manage was a pathetic wheezing noise. "So, so happy. I'm so glad that I found you."

What do I even say?

"Aha..."

Wow. What a great response. He truly was a genius.

Cinder pulled away from the embrace, gripping his shoulders at either side and keeping him still. Tears formed in her eyes and ran down her cheeks, ruining her makeup. "I... I'm sorry, I... Look, I don't mean to make you nervous, I just..." Unable to find the words, she slowly shook her head.

Jaune looked back with his mouth hanging open. His body froze up. "It's, uh... alright..."

Cinder paused to calm herself and took a deep breath, slowing the shaking of her body. "Have you ever kissed a girl before, Jaune?"

He stared blankly with his eyebrows raised, thinking that that was certainly an odd thing to ask him. Was she trying to make fun of him or something? "No? I suppose I haven't."

Cinder's mouth formed a soft smile for just a moment before she quickly leaned in and kissed him. He tried to pull away, only because

he was caught off guard, but she wrapped her arms around the back of his neck and pulled him back towards her. His eyes widened.

Once it registered in his mind what was happening, he stopped trying to pull back and let her take control. She held him against her like he'd fly away if she let go, leaning her entire body weight on him and nearly forcing his back down onto the bed.

Slowly and hesitantly, Cinder separated herself and let him breathe. He looked at her with empty eyes and an open mouth.

... *huh?*

Eyeliner ran down Cinder's face as she brought her shaking hand up to his cheek. "So you are real," she whispered with a smile. If it was supposed to be a joke, he didn't fully understand it.

"I... what?"

She opened her mouth, making a noise somewhat resembling someone on their deathbed struggling to get last words out before they passed. Eventually, she managed to put them together.

"I love you."

...

...

...

His mind stayed in its current state of general blankness for a few seconds before the last thirty seconds finally caught up with him.

She'd kissed him.

And said she loved him.

Maybe he should've been happy, but that was just so... intense. More intense than anything he'd expected out of this. More intense than anything he'd *wanted* out of this, if he was being honest. He never saw things going this fast with anyone.

It occurred to him that she wanted a response. It also occurred to him, as he stared into her eyes, which seemed so full of hope and feeling, what kind of response she needed. The question was whether or not he should give it to her.

Did he like her? Yeah, to some degree. He wouldn't have gone out with someone he didn't like at least a little bit. He also had enjoyed kissing her, which he probably wouldn't have if that wasn't the case. She was kind, beautiful, seemed to care a lot. Their date had gone great. All reasons to have interest in her.

But did he *love* her?

As in the kind of love that people developed through long term relationships? He didn't really want to say it, but no, not really. They'd only even been on one date, was it even normal for someone to have that kind of feeling this early on?

Looking at her, though, with tears running down her face and her expectant smile... He got the sense that telling her that would truly, entirely break her heart. So did he want to break her heart, or did he want to lie to her?

Jaune avoided eye contact, looking down at the mattress they were sitting on. Cinder once again forced his gaze back towards her, her smile ever so slowly beginning to fall. Guilt started to rise in his chest.

Jaune never liked hurting people.

"I... think I love you too, Cinder."

The girl across from him let out the loudest sob he'd ever heard in his life and embraced him again, harder this time, with her nails digging into his back. "I *knew* you did!" she said, ugly crying. "I *knew* it! I knew we were meant for each other! Ever since I met you!"

Despite the pain, he accepted it, figuring she just needed to let it all out right now. If this was how she felt, it would be best to let her express that.

They sat there together for a long moment until her crying grew quiet and her body still. Her grip never loosened up on him. "Cinder," he said, speaking softly into her ear.

"Hm?"

"I, um... have to go. My team's waiting on me."

"Why can't you just stay here with me?"

"I'm sorry, I just can't. My team's expecting me back any moment now, and they'll get mad if I stay over at a girl's dorm," he said, laughing nervously.

Cinder took a deep sigh and began running her hand through the hair on the back of his head. "Why is that any of their business?" she said calmly.

"Well, y'know, team business and all that, haha... I'll... talk to you tomorrow."

Jaune started to stand up, but not a second after he was on his feet, Cinder did the same and put her hands around his waist. "You should stay!"

"Cinder-"

"I'll tell my teammates to spend the night somewhere else! We can stay here together, and you don't even have to tell your friends anything."

Cinder tried leaning in again, but he pulled away.

"Maybe another time. I'm sorry, but I really gotta go right now."

Hesitantly, she took her hands off of him and let him go. "Okay, fine. I'll let you go for now."

"Talk to you later," he said, moving towards the door. He heard her say something about calling him in the morning before he closed it behind him, took a deep breath, and began walking back towards his dorm down the hall.

A few things flashed through his mind on his way. For one thing, he already felt bad for lying to her. He just didn't want to hurt her, and there really didn't seem to be any other option to avoid doing that. I mean, how would he have even begun to try telling her that he didn't feel the same way? With how she was looking at him? Or maybe he had this whole thing all mixed up. Maybe he did love her, and just didn't know it was love because he didn't have any experience with dating. Part of him hoped for that.

Arriving at his dorm, Jaune took a deep sigh before opening the door. Pyrrha, hunched over her desk, jumped at the noise and snapped her head towards him.

From one problem to another, huh?

"Hey," he said, doing his best to flash a smile and make everything normal.

Pyrrha stared for a few seconds before looking back down. "Hello," she said, her voice cracking.

"... You doing alright?"

His partner glanced back at him for a second, but quickly averted her gaze, turning her head towards the back wall this time. "Y-yes..."

"Do you wanna talk about anything?"

He received a quick shake of the head as she buried her face in the palms of her hands.

Jaune frowned. He wanted to comfort her, but she still didn't seem ready to talk. Maybe tomorrow. Or if not, he'd try the next. They'd have to sort things out eventually, right? They were partners.

"I'm gonna run to the restroom," he said quietly. No response.

He hesitated before closing the bathroom door, but even as he stood there waiting, his partner sat still and refused to acknowledge him. Dejected, Jaune decided there was no use at the moment and turned away from her.

She'd been distant the past week, to say the least. They had done everything together up until she confessed, but now he was lucky to get a full sentence out of her. He'd tried talking to her a couple times, but she always managed to avoid it. Today might've been even worse than usual, though. She'd never outright refused to look at him like that.

Leaning over the sink, Jaune closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, he saw a smear of red lipstick stuck to his reflection's cheek. Suddenly, her reaction made sense.

"Great going, idiot," he groaned to himself. "Helped out a ton with that one."

No wonder she didn't want to look at him, he might as well have just come in and told her everything that had just happened! Oum, why did this all have to be so complicated? Why couldn't he have been able to just get a girl and leave things at that?

Well, no use in dwelling on it now. He'd done what he'd done and now it was time to deal with that.

Whelp, finally managed to finish this. Life's crazy, guys. The next chapters should be out quicker than this one. Thanks for the continued support.

Chapter 13

"I just... I don't understand what I did *wrong!*" Pyrrha sobbed into her sleeve, sitting on her bed and leaning over far enough so that her face hovered just above her legs. "Was I not nice enough?! I helped him as much as I could, didn't I? I trained him! I *believed* in him!"

Nora, sitting next to her, put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her teammate towards her. "Of course you did. You did everything you could for him."

Over to the side, Ren lay down with his head propped up against a pillow and a book in his hands, one leg crossed over the other. Silent as usual, he didn't seem to feel any obligation to join in on the conversation. The only one missing was Jaune. Of course, he'd begun to spend much more time outside the dorm as of recent. Wherever he went, Pyrrha didn't know and hadn't asked.

"But then *why* doesn't he *like* me?! What did *she* do for him that was so amazing? I just... don't understand it."

Nora sighed. "You did more for him than anybody could have asked of you. I don't understand it either. But sometimes that doesn't help as much as you think it will, anyways."

Pyrrha unburied her face from her hands and looked up at her, still hunched over. "Well then what does? How am I supposed to know what to do if I can't even figure out what went wrong in the first place?"

"I am so glad you asked," Nora said, flashing a toothy smile. "If you'd like my expert opinion, you should start by having a conversation with Jaune. You know, the kind you sit down for. Who better to answer all your questions than the man himself?"

"What's even the *point*?" Pyrrha looked away again, staring at the wall in front of her with glassy eyes. "He already found somebody else, and she probably makes him happier than I ever could. What good will talking with him do if it won't help me be with him? It's pointless."

Nora shook her head. "Well, you can at least be friends with him again, right? Think of this as a first step towards the rebuilding of your relationship."

"I don't want to be friends with him. I want to be his girlfriend..."

Pyrrha almost broke out crying again. She knew Nora was trying to help, but what good was talking to him going to do? He had someone else. He didn't care about her, at least not like that. Not in the way she wanted him to. Talking wouldn't change that.

"Not much can be done about that right now, Pyrrha," she said, patting her on the back, "But if you talk to him, you can at least get some closure. It can't hurt, in any case."

But what if it did hurt? What if he told her something she didn't want to hear? What if the problem was something she couldn't change, that she just wasn't good enough for him? What if - even worse - he told her that he knew about her feelings and had chosen to ignore them because this Cinder girl was simply... better.

Pyrrha sat in silence.

Nora grinned and rubbed her chin. "You wanna know something I've always wondered about, Pyrrha?"

No response from her fellow redhead.

"Why do you think college relationships always end so quickly? Isn't that funny? Oh, and the first girlfriends never stay, do they? I kinda thought that was funny, y'know, 'cuz this is Jaune's first girl and we're in college."

...

"I... suppose that is true," Pyrrha said, her voice muffled as she spoke with her face shoved back into her sleeves.

"That's not even to mention the long-distance thing. She's an exchange student, isn't she? A few more months and it's back to wherever she came from. I doubt *that* kinda romance ever lasts all that long. Besides, they've only been on one date. In any case, it won't be easy for Jaune to keep up with all that even if it does last."

Pyrrha shook her head. "That's wrong. To hope that they break up, I mean. I..." She took a second to think through her next words. "I don't *enjoy* seeing him do this with someone else, but I can't root for something like that. It'd be cruel."

"Yea? Now, what about when you caught her following him around? Creepy, wouldn't you say? Personally, I think stalking's a lot more *wrong* than not wanting the stalker to date their stalkee."

Her teammate's mention of the incident took Pyrrha by surprise. She'd mostly forgotten about it, having stayed focused on Jaune's attention to Cinder rather than the other way around. Now that she thought about it again, though, feelings of concern found their way back to her.

She didn't think it was necessarily her bias speaking when she agreed with Nora that yes, following the two of them around had been weird. But Pyrrha was a celebrity, and she was used to people stopping to stare. At some point, she had been forced to accept that kind of thing as normal. She may have not liked it, but that didn't stop it from happening.

"We've been over this, Nora. Cinder was probably looking at me because I'm famous and people do that to famous people. Sure, it struck me as strange, but it wasn't a big deal. I'm used to it."

"Wrong!" Nora shouted, making her flinch. "She was trailing Jaune with intent to strike, and looked at you because you were there to protect him. But at some point, this succubus isolated your man and took him as her own! What, are we supposed to sit by and let all this happen? I say we ought to help our friend and leader!"

The sheer absurdity of what had come out of her teammate's mouth was enough to dry her tears. She was known to go off the rails once in a while, but seriously, what was she talking about?

"Calm down, Nora," Ren said from his side of the room.

"In a little, Rennie!"

Pyrrha swallowed. "I'm... not sure that's entirely reasonable."

"Oh yeah?" Nora crossed her arms. "What do you think happened, then?"

"Well," she said, sighing, "Cinder stopped to stare at me because she was surprised to see a celebrity and Jaune happened to catch her eye, either then or some other time. I doubt she was *stalking* anyone. We can't assume something like that."

"Ridiculous. Unfounded and laughable," Nora said matter-of-factly, puffing out her chest.

Pyrrha almost smiled. Almost. "Then what do *you* suppose happened?"

"Obviously, this girl saw him around in the hallway or somewhere, and for whatever reason found him so unbelievably attractive that she had to know more about him," she said, earning a rare eye roll from the usually polite Pyrrha. "So, of course, she began stalking him. Now, does that sound like a healthy relationship? Nope! And that's why it's your moral obligation to help him out of it."

Pyrrha stared up at her friend, who sat up straight, proud, and almost certainly very wrong. In a strange way, she envied her. If only she had half the confidence of Nora, she probably wouldn't have waited so long to ask Jaune out.

"And what exactly do you think 'helping him' entails?"

"I'm so glad you asked." Nora beamed. "First step is gathering evidence."

"I'm sorry, but what you're saying is senseless," Pyrrha said, shaking her head. She stood up off the bed and straightened out her clothing. "I appreciate that you mean well, but this... this isn't what I need right now, and it's time I get out of the room for a bit."

"Alright, I'm sorry. I'll drop it if you want me to."

"No, no, I just need to go and blow off some steam is all."

Ren spoke up this time. "Just let her go, Nora. I'm sure she'll talk some more about it later."

Nora relented. "Alright, fine. But don't think I won't-!"

In a move Pyrrha would have usually avoided out of courtesy, she shut the door behind her without waiting for her friend to finish talking. She knew that she was trying her best, but the last thing she wanted was to get wrapped up in some conspiracy surrounding her love interest. What she needed right now was a way to relieve her stress. So even if it wasn't a regular training day, that meant it was time for that, if nothing else just as a way to get her mind off things.

So to the roof it was for her.

Cinder walked into the dorm with her chin held high. Emerald and Mercury both picked their heads up to look at her as she entered, the

latter quickly losing interest while the former kept her gaze fixed on her boss. She looked back at neither.

"I've got that intel you requested, ma'am," Emerald said, turning her body to pick up a folder laying beside her on the bed. "It doesn't seem like they've filled in all the details yet, but it's a start."

Wordlessly, Cinder reached out to take the folder out of her hands and glanced over the contents, details of Beacon's security measures for the Vytal Festival. The girl was right; there were certainly some holes they hadn't plugged yet, but it was very valuable information nonetheless. Plus, she imagined they would keep the finished plans wherever Emerald found this rough draft, so it was good to know that she could rely on her to get her hands on the real thing.

"Very good, Emerald, but do tell me these are copies. The last thing we need is for some professor to find a few files missing and trace that back to us."

"Of course they are, ma'am."

Cinder stretched her arm out to hand them back to her. "I'm glad. Now find a spot for those. No more leaving these things out in the open, either, and that goes for both of you. Put them somewhere you're confident no one would spot them if somebody else were to wander in here."

Emerald looked puzzled at the request, but complied and promptly lifted up her mattress to stuff the files between it and the bed frame. Cinder figured that would do just fine.

Things were going along smoothly, very smoothly.

For one thing, their plans for Beacon seemed to be nearly complete. The only reason they hadn't been finalized months earlier was because she needed information that could only be found at the school itself, but now that she had most of that, the only hold up

would be waiting for the Vytal Tournament to actually roll around. Soon enough, the other half of the maiden powers would be rightfully hers.

Of course, all of that paled in comparison to the progress she'd made on the other, more important, side of things.

Memories of the other night that hadn't once left her mind came back more vivid than ever. She thought about how kind he'd been to her, how good he'd tasted. And, of course, when he'd told her that he loved her. Jaune really loved her! It was such an indescribable feeling, knowing that her darling had the same kind of feelings. Nothing else really came close.

They'd kissed, too. The flavor of his lips still lingered on her own. If just kissing him had been that amazing, then she couldn't wait to take things further with him. Imagining it had her knees weak.

Still, though, her work was far from done. She couldn't just make him fall in love, she had to prove to him that loving her was worth it. She had to make him happy in a way nobody else could. That way, he'd have no reason to think of leaving her. Only then, when he realized that she was the only person he needed in his life, could she relax and focus completely on enjoying herself. Maybe she'd tell him the truth at that point, too.

Cinder took a seat at the desk. "I want both of you out of this room. I have personal business to attend to. Well? Hurry out."

Mercury sighed and rolled his eyes, but got up and made his way to the door. Emerald, meanwhile, looked up at her in confusion, but a stern glare back sent her on the same path. With the two of them cleared out, she now found herself alone.

Sitting with her legs crossed, Cinder reached into her pocket to pull out her scroll and dial that oh so cherished number. The ringing chimed out through an empty dorm, and after a period that felt much

longer than it probably was, Jaune's beautiful face finally appeared on her screen.

"Hey, Cinder. What d'ya need?"

"Hello, darling," she said, curling a lock of hair around her finger. "I wanted to make sure we're still on for training tonight. You still want to do that, right?"

"Yeah, of course. I can meet up with you if you just give me twenty minutes."

"Lovely! I'll meet you out on the roof in twenty, then. See you soon!"

"See you soon, then," Jaune said, flashing a smile before he hung up and her screen went dark.

Cinder beamed and hurried to change out of her school uniform. At last, some more alone time with him! They hadn't gotten as much of that as she would've liked today because of classes and his schedule, but once she got him to leave his friends behind, they'd have a lot more.

Oh, and it looked like that might end up being easier than she'd initially thought it would be. He and Nikos had seemed much more distant than usual as of late. At first, Cinder had assumed that they'd go back to being all buddy-buddy in no time, but that hadn't happened, at least not yet. It was undeniable now. Something had happened between the two of them, and whatever it was, she loved it.

They no longer sat next to each other in classes, or walked through the halls side by side, or did homework together in the library. Perhaps Jaune had realized he didn't need her and told her to back off, or perhaps Nikos had decided it was useless to pursue him and given up. In any case, it was beyond refreshing to see her leave him alone for once.

Cinder got to the roof early. As she opened the door, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, greeting the cold night air with her hands on her hips. She had to admit, this was a nice spot. It was remote and out of the way, for one thing, so there wasn't much of a concern over other students coming to interrupt her. She could enjoy the moment, just her and her beloved Jaune.

When she opened her eyes, she quickly became aware of another figure there with her. One that was not, in fact, her beloved, although one that did pre-occupy her thoughts quite a bit over the past few weeks. Her mouth curled into a scowl.

"Nikos..."

The girl in question looked over awkwardly from across the roof, turning her head towards her in the middle of some leg stretch. The two stared at each other for a moment before Nikos broke eye contact and continued with what she was doing.

Cinder cleared her throat in a failed attempt to get her attention. Her scowl deepened.

"Excuse me," she said, her tone betraying whatever politeness her phrasing might've conveyed. "I was just about to meet Jaune here. I'd much prefer it if you left."

Pyrrha looked back at her, surprised. "Oh, um... Sorry. I'll... do that."

Her words were shaky and weak, as if she were on the verge of tears and would start sobbing any second. It was more pathetic than anything else, really, to see someone so often lauded as some kind of champion seemingly on the edge of a breakdown. Not to mention how quickly she'd given up her little spot. Cinder had anticipated at least some pushback, but the girl couldn't even muster that. Apparently, she needed to lower her expectations.

Cinder glared at her as she walked by. "I'll be up here with him everyday from here on out, too, so I wouldn't come back much if I

were you."

Pyrrha stopped. Her shoulders slumped and she walked away with her head down. Even without seeing her face, she could tell that it had upsetted her. Good. She'd only really said it in order to make her jealous.

Now alone, a smile crept its way onto her face. Jaune would be meeting her soon.

Sure enough, she didn't have to wait long for him to arrive. Her heart fluttered as he walked through the door. He was early. Three minutes and twenty-two seconds early. How could anybody deny that they were meant for each other when he was arriving three minutes and twenty-two seconds early for her? He, too, must've realized that they were destined to be together.

Jaune greeted her with a short wave and a smile of his own as he walked towards her. Cinder hurried over to him, pressing her body against his close enough to feel his heartbeat and put her hands around his waist.

"I'm so glad you could come," she said, looking up into his eyes. "You just couldn't stay away from me, could you?"

"Hey now, you invited me!"

Cinder wrapped her arms around the back of his neck and pulled his face down to hers. "You're early."

Jaune chuckled and took a step back, breaking the contact. He reached over his back and pulled out his shield. "Should we get started, then?"

"What, you don't want to have a little fun first?" she said, grabbing his wrist to pull him back towards her and putting her free hand on his cheek. His face went red. "Surely, it would do you good to destress a bit."

Although a bead of sweat trickled down his forehead, his smile went nowhere. "W-why don't we wait after we're done? Make sure we get all our reps in and all that..."

Cinder smirked. Admittedly, she found some fun in making him fluster. Maybe she just liked that he found her so attractive that, even though they were dating, she still made him nervous. Or maybe it was just the sort of power it gave her over him. Whatever the case, it was amazing.

"I suppose I can wait just a bit longer. Let's begin, then."

Cinder watched as Jaune sat down by the ledge of the roof, his body glistening with sweat. Over the horizon, the sunset produced a deep layer of orange.

Jaune put his hand over his chest and gasped for air. "Okay, why don't we call it there?"

"You're improving very fast, Jaune," she said, putting her weapon away. "I must say, you've really impressed me tonight."

Her darling responded with a weak smile that went as quickly as it came. He was very clearly exhausted, his chest heaving up and down with each breath. Up and down, up and down, up... and down... and up...

Cinder bit her lip. Hard enough to draw blood, if not for aura.

She sat down next to him. "I really mean it. I'm not just saying that to try and encourage you."

"Thanks," he said, still breathing heavily. "Your training has helped a ton."

"Well then why don't we start doing it more often?"

Jaune looked over to her. "Hm?"

"We could start doing this every day, if you'd like. Or even if you don't feel like training every day, we can just come up here to spend time together." Cinder turned her body towards him and slid closer. "Talk. Be alone and by ourselves. Like a date."

"I mean, I'd love to, but I usually come over here with Pyrrha..."

She had almost forgotten about that detail. No matter. Cinder could deal with that, she'd just need to take the right angle.

"Really?" she said, frowning. "I figured you'd stopped after you hadn't come up here for the past few days. Or did your schedule change?"

Jaune looked down at the floor and scratched the back of his neck. "Well, no..."

"Do you not want to spend time with me?" Cinder did her best to look hurt. "I- I understand if you want a little space, but I really thought that you-"

"No, no, it's not that. I- Well, me and Pyrrha haven't been as close as we used to be recently, and..." Jaune shook his head and gave her a weak smile. "You know what? I'm sure you don't want to hear me ramble on about all that. Sure, Cinder, I'll come up here with you. Maybe not every day, but when I can."

Cinder smirked, almost taken off guard by how easy that had been. She knew she could convince him one way or another, but for him to give in that quickly was surprising. Surprising, and, in a way, satisfying.

"I knew you would understand," she said, resting her head on one shoulder and wrapping her arm around the other, her eyes closed.

Even though she couldn't see it, Cinder could practically feel his face turning red.

Chapter 14

Pyrrha watched as, a few rows down from her in Goodwitches' classroom, Jaune talked to the black-haired girl across from him. Her leg shook under the table. She bit at her fingernail, having long given up on trying to appear unbothered.

Cinder stood leaned over this desk, looking down at him. Pyrrha searched for some sign that he felt nervous or uncomfortable, but he seemed happy enough. Both of them did, for that matter. In fact, Cinder's smile appeared to somehow get bigger every time Jaune spoke to her. The girl put one hand on his shoulder and used the other to tuck a lock of his hair behind his ear.

A lump grew in her throat and Pyrrha looked away. She wasn't sure whether to cry or go down there and try to fight the girl. Either way, she couldn't very well do either right before class.

Although she would've loved to continue burying her jealousy, that had become difficult as of late. It was hard seeing him with another woman, and the way that woman had spoken to her only served to make it worse. Maybe it was a selfish thought, but how come someone so cruel got to be with him while Pyrrha had to settle for friendship? She wasn't going to act like Cinder had murdered her or anything, but that didn't seem right.

All she could do was hope that his date showed more kindness to him than she had to her.

Pyrrha bit down hard enough on her thumb to damage her aura. What if she didn't? It might've sounded ridiculous, the idea that Jaune would choose to date somebody who didn't treat him well, but sometimes that kind of thing could be complicated. She'd heard that a lot of people in toxic relationships didn't realize it until much later. Plus, Jaune was the type to see the best in people before he saw

any of their flaws, so if she did mistreat him, he'd make excuses for her. Both to himself and to others.

Okay, so there were definitely some mental gymnastics going on there, but still, there wasn't anything wrong with being concerned!

Her classmates began filing into their seats as Professor Goodwitch called for everyone's attention. Cinder, too, moved away from Jaune towards the other side of the room, but not before blowing him a kiss.

"Hurry to your seats! We haven't got all day!"

Jaune paid seemingly no mind to their teacher and instead stared at Cinder's back as the girl made her way over to her own spot in the classroom. He only turned back to Goodwitch a good half-minute into her lecture.

Pyrrha's heart sank into her chest, although she, too, mostly tuned out the lesson. She tried taking notes at first, but the more she attempted to ignore it, the more she found herself preoccupied over Jaune and that girl. It certainly didn't help much that her partner was sitting just a few rows down from her, right in her line of sight. That wasn't even to mention Cinder almost directly across to the other side of the room. Everytime she glanced up, she saw one of the two.

Her eyes wandered over to the girl without realizing it. She had her chin resting on her palm with her legs crossed, and seemed to be paying as little attention to the lecture as Pyrrha. Instead, her gaze was directed to a spot just below her. She hardly needed to check but to confirm what, or rather who, she was so fixated on.

Somehow, that bothered her. It would be ridiculous to insist that it was wrong to simply look at the person you're dating, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

When she looked back at Cinder, her gaze lingered just a moment too long. The girl noticed and met her eyes with a scowl. Pyrrha

froze. The two of them sat there for a short moment, staring at each other, one with apprehension and the other with what looked like disgust or anger or both.

Pyrrha broke eye contact first and soon felt Cinder's stare leave her.

Her hand shook subtly out of anger, for Cinder but also for herself. She hated how that girl thought she could push her around and speak to her like garbage, but she hated just as much how, for whatever reason, she did nothing to push back against it.

Why couldn't she muster the courage? And how in Oum's name did she get a date with Jaune treating people like *that* ?

Shards of what was once a pencil flew apart on her desk. The noise startled her as much as it did anyone around, nearly making her jump out her seat. A student to the left gave her an unsettled look as Pyrrha sank further into her seat and suddenly, anger made way for embarrassment. Any hope she had of paying attention to the lecture was gone now.

The rest of the class broke into a clamor as students got up out of their seats at the sound of the bell. Pyrrha took her time in gathering her notes together, having no desire to beat everyone else out of the room anyways.

As she looked around the room, Cinder, having hurried back to Jaune as soon as the bell rang, again caught her eye. She stood facing him with her body between his and the way to the exit and said something that made his face go bright red. Pyrrha couldn't hear whatever that was over the noise the other students made.

Once everyone else left, though, maybe she would be able to listen...

She shook her head as if to physically force thought out of her mind. Whatever they said to each other in private was their business, not

hers.

Although if she really wanted to make sure that she was treating him well, surely it wouldn't be *that* bad... right?

That's right, she was just concerned! She was just trying to be a good friend, that was all. What was so wrong about that? Besides, if they were saying it to each other with all these other students around, it couldn't have been any kind of secret!

Jaune and Cinder stayed put even as the other stragglers and even Professor Goodwitch began filing out of the classroom. As the last few remaining finally took off, Cinder looked up at Pyrrha, narrowed her eyes, and lowered her voice, leaning in to talk to Jaune with a hushed tone. Pyrrha deflated. She knew now, or was at least suspicious. The look in her eyes made that abundantly clear.

It was a stupid idea anyways.

Another moment went by and the pair began walking up the staircase towards the exit, Cinder's arm wrapped around his. She stood on his side, between him and Pyrrha, and gave her a mistrustful glare as they passed.

Pyrrha gripped the table in front of her. *What was this girl's problem?* It seemed like everytime she acknowledged her it was only to let her know that she didn't like her.

Taking a calming breath, Pyrrha gathered her textbooks and got up, heading for the door.

She planned to make a beeline for her dorm, but her legs froze completely at the sound of Jaune's voice from just around the corner. She knew she should've kept going, that there was probably nothing worth hearing in their conversation anyway, and told herself as such. Even so, some strange gut feeling of urgency kept her glued to that spot.

I'm just concerned! There's nothing wrong with that!

"I don't know, Cinder, I've got classes early tomorrow. Can't we do that over the weekend?"

Pyrrha put her back up against the wall, straining to hear a conversation that probably would have been completely disinteresting to literally anybody else.

Cinder said something too quiet for Pyrrha to pick up on, and in seemingly an instant the two of them ran off somewhere. She couldn't see them from where she was, but could hear their footsteps and Jaune's calls to slow down as they fled.

Something compelled her down the corridor. Maybe it was concern or jealousy or simple curiosity, but Pyrrha felt a strong need to follow them, and there was no time to think it through. She looked around to make sure no one saw before darting towards where they'd disappeared.

It didn't take long to find them again. The two hadn't gone far, having cut into a corner a bit away down the hall. Pyrrha stopped on a dime and stood barely out of sight.

Still just concerned! Just want to make sure he's being treated right!

"I just can't help myself," she heard Cinder say through heavy breathing. "Not when you look at me like that." The sound of lips against lips made her cringe.

Pyrrha closed her eyes and clenched her teeth, taking a deep breath as if hearing the interaction caused her physical pain that she was trying to subdue.

"C-can we not do this right here? Out in the open, I mean," Jaune said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I don't want somebody to see us and get uncomfortable."

"Ugh, you're so *cute* when you're nervous. Don't worry," Cinder snickered at his concern, "Nobody'll find us here, not when everybody's going back to their dorms. There's nothing to worry about."

The two started kissing. Again.

Alarm bells went off in Pyrrha's head.

See!? Her concerns weren't invalid! The girl had totally brushed off Jaune's wishes, just like that! How could their relationship possibly be equal if Cinder didn't have any concern about how he felt? What else would she do to him if his needs meant that little to her? A knot tightened in her stomach.

She had to talk to him about this. Sure, it might not have *seemed* like a big deal, but what if it led to something worse? Jaune didn't deserve that, he deserved to be respected.

But... how would she?

Her stomach dropped as the reality of what she'd done set in. She'd deliberately followed them over here to eavesdrop. She'd broken his trust whether he was currently aware of that or not, and she'd have to explain that to him if she really wanted to have that conversation.

This was stupid anyway. I'm being stupid.

Pyrrha felt tears streaming down her face as it got harder and harder to stay silent. This was all so idiotic, going after them like this. Listening to them like this. Getting into their business like this. Before she could process it, her legs carried her back towards where she'd come from.

It was stupid anyways.

Cinder pressed her body against Jaune and wrapped her arms around his neck. He spoke softly, but not too quietly, into her ear, sending a shiver down her spine. "C-can we not do this right here? Out in the open, I mean. I don't want somebody to see us and get uncomfortable."

She pulled him tighter, running her hand through his hair with a smirk. Perhaps in another situation, she would've taken him somewhere else to continue this in private, but they had to put on a show. They couldn't disappoint their audience, afterall.

Nikos seemed to think that she was being subtle, but Cinder begged to differ. That bitch had practically shaken the building running after them. It was quite frankly a miracle that Jaune hadn't noticed it as well.

God, that girl was so pathetic.

"Ugh, you're so *cute* when you're nervous. Don't worry," she continued, "Nobody'll find us here, not when everybody's going back to their dorms. There's nothing to worry about."

Cinder pulled him back in, forcing his lips against hers. She kept it like that and enjoyed him until the subsiding sound of footsteps came from around the corner, at which point she separated herself ever so slightly and quickly put a finger up to his lips, telling him to stay quiet. He looked back at her, confused.

She wanted badly to vent her frustrations, reveal to him how she really felt about Nikos and lambast her for getting in their business. It certainly would have been a weight off her shoulders. Unfortunately, though, nothing seemed to suggest that Jaune had realized how bad his partner really was for him, so those thoughts would have to stay hidden for a little longer. Until then, she could continue to find the patience to play concerned.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Those footsteps." Cinder smirked. "Looks like your little friend got curious."

Jaune frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Your partner. She was following us since we left the classroom."

Her love, bless his heart, didn't seem to process it. He stared at her with a blank expression. "What? Why would she do that?"

"Perhaps you should ask her about that."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "That's not something she would do."

Cinder sighed. The look on his face suggested disbelief, but she found no accusation in his eyes. It was as if he didn't believe her one bit but at the same time didn't think she was misleading him. "You know I wouldn't lie to you, Jaune. You trust me, right?"

"Well, yeah... of course I do."

"Then why don't you believe me?" She grabbed his hand in hers and gave it a soft squeeze. "I'm only trying to help you. And I understand how to do that because I understand *you*. Better than anyone. So please trust me when I say that I'm telling you the truth."

Jaune hesitated. "I don't think you're lying to me, Cinder, but I just can't imagine Pyrrha doing something like that."

"Sometimes people do things to you that you don't expect," she said, shrugging. "But you trusted her, and she betrayed you. You can't simply ignore something like that."

"I wouldn't take it *that* far..."

"Why not? You put trust in her to respect you, and she took advantage of that. She expected to get away with it because you had faith in her to let your business be yours. She *betrayed* you." Jaune gave her no response. "Besides, how do you know this is the first time she's done something like this? You only know now because I was here for you. For all we know, she follows you every other time you leave your dorm."

Cinder wasn't so delusional that she couldn't see some irony in her words, seeing as there was, in fact, somebody following him every other time he left his dorm, only it wasn't his partner. But there was a clear difference. Cinder followed him to protect him, and she had a right to know about his activities. His business *was* her business, because they had a uniquely significant bond. Nikos had no such thing with him and never would.

Jaune looked down at his feet. "You know what? I'll talk to her tonight about it. She'll tell me the truth if I ask her."

"Will she?" she responded, raising her eyebrows. "Are you really that confident in her?"

"I am."

They sat in silence. Cinder took the moment to look into his eyes. Even though some time had passed since she first saw them, their beauty still shocked her. They seemed to open into a sapphire ocean, beckoning her into their waters. He suddenly fixated back onto her and she saw her reflection in his pupil.

"Are you alright?"

Cinder didn't register his words at first. When her mind caught up, the question took her aback for a second before she noticed her own breathlessness.

"O-oh, yes, of course," she said, gasping for air. "Apologies. Now, back to our conversation," Cinder cleared her throat, "I'm only

concerned about you, Jaune. Don't you remember how you were when we first started talking?"

Jaune blinked. "Sure I do, but what's that got to do with this?"

"You looked down on yourself. You thought you weren't good enough. Did your friends do nothing to help that? If I recall correctly, that only went away when I came into the picture."

"I... what...?"

"What I'm trying to say is that I'm concerned because of your friends. They stood by and let you suffer by yourself, and now they follow you around when you want to spend time with someone else? And you see nothing wrong with that?"

Jaune sighed.. "I appreciate that you're concerned about me," he said with a shake of the head, "but those *are* my friends for a reason. They treat me as good as I could ask them to."

Damn it. This would be harder than she thought it would.

He was still too close, far too close, with those "friends" of his. Somehow, she needed to show him that he didn't need them. No, that wouldn't cut it. She needed to show him how harmful they really were to him. Then he would finally realize that only *she* could give him the treatment he deserved and only *she* could make him happy.

Cinder pondered telling him that outright but decided against it. Words wouldn't get her very far, no, what she needed was action. Something that would provide irrefutable proof of her loyalty and at the same time make him question that of his friends. Or anything to keep him away from them, really. She wasn't going to be particularly picky about it.

"Alright, I'll leave it alone for now, but know that I'm here for you if you need anything at all. Your friends can't give you everything that I can," she said with a wink.

Jaune laughed softly and hung his head. "Thanks, Cinder."

"Of course," she responded, caressing his cheek. "Now, on another note, there is something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"My teammate will be arriving tomorrow, and I'd like to introduce you to her. Mint is her name."

Jaune smiled. "Sure. When should I meet the two of you?"

"I'll text you when she arrives. You should come down to the landing spot so you two can have a brief meeting before I show her to our dorm. There's no need for anything formal or lengthy."

Jaune probably assumed that she wanted him to know her own "friends," but really she was making sure Neo knew exactly who he was and what would happen if she messed with him. The best and easiest way to do that would be to introduce him and then pull her aside and have a *very* strongly worded conversation. She might've worried that Roman's little pet would try and exploit her relationship with him regardless of whatever threat went her way, but wildcard or not, the girl acted on behalf of Roman. That coward wouldn't dare do anything to upset her.

"Works for me," he said, shrugging.

"Great. Her bullhead will likely land sometime in the early afternoon, but I'll keep you in the loop if anything changes. So, now that that's out of the way..."

Cinder leaned in with a smirk and wrapped her arms around the back of his neck, but Jaune pushed back. He didn't put up enough resistance to actually stop her but it did let her know that he didn't want to get back to it just yet.

"Alright, that's enough for now," he said humorously. "I need to get back to my dorm soon and catch up on some school work."

Cinder sighed. "Can't you put that on hold for an hour or two? I promise you I'll make it worth it."

"Look, why don't you let me go now, and I'm all yours for as long as you want tomorrow, okay?"

"You never told me I'd have to *bargain* for your time," she said with a laugh, "But I suppose I can make that work. If that's how it's going to be, meet me outside your dorm early tomorrow. Don't keep me waiting."

"I can do that. See you early tomorrow, then."

"I'll be waiting on it."

Cinder leaned her shoulder against the wall as she watched him walk back down the hallway, entranced by the motion, and brought a hand to her chest to still her beating heart. It hurt to see him leave. His promise that he'd be hers the next day was really the only reason she let him in the first place. Oh yes, she *loved* the sound of that. The only question was how far he'd let her go, but she didn't mind pushing that boundary. Her face grew a light shade of red.

I wonder if he'll let me put a collar on him.

Once he was out of view, she turned around and headed back to her own dorm, her expression unchanging.

Maybe I should pick one up, just in case. Oh, and a leash, too, to make sure he really knows who he belongs to.

By the time she got back to her dorm, she had to wait a few moments to let her body calm itself down. Once she saw her face return to its normal color in her scroll's reflection, she opened the door and walked inside to see Mercury and Emerald sitting in their

usual spots, probably waiting to debrief after the end of the school week.

"If you two have anything to report, you may save it for another time. I have matters of my own to think over, and they do not involve either of you, at least not as of yet."

Emerald looked like she wanted to say something but canned it. Mercury shrugged, looking perfectly satisfied with that. Good. No disagreements.

She had told no lie to either of them. Right now, her mind was not on their plans for Beacon; they instead lay on her own plans for Jaune and his companions. One way or another, they'd be separated. Whether that could happen through simple remarks or if she'd have to use brute force was yet to be seen, but one way or another, they'd be separated.

Cinder saw three ways to start.

One, she could simply monopolize him, keeping him as close to her as possible as often as possible so none of his friends could talk to him without going through her. Eventually, when he found himself happier than ever without any interaction with them, he'd realize who really mattered and stop paying mind to anyone else all on his own. But that would be difficult, especially considering he slept in the same room as some of them. Unless she could somehow arrange for them to stay in the same dorm, that was already a big problem. Besides, she herself unfortunately had to spend a little time away from him when it came to the maiden powers and her duties to Salem.

It was a simple solution, but not necessarily an easy one.

The second would be to keep it subtle. Frame herself as a concerned partner and exaggerate his friends flaws and issues like she had earlier. A few comments here and there to make him doubt whether they really had his best interests at heart. The issue,

though, was that he'd met it with some considerable resistance when she'd tried doing so a few minutes ago. If she kept at it for long enough, it may work, but the Vytal Festival gave her a deadline. Still, it could prove a viable strategy if carried out correctly.

Or, lastly, she could do something drastic. Something that would force him to see things for what they were. Perhaps outright demand that he stop spending time with his friends, or threaten them into breaking it off with him, or stage some sort of situation to "save" him from... The possibilities didn't end there.

It could work. It could also push him away. But it could work. It certainly held the most risk of all the options, but that risk came with a high ceiling for reward.

She shook her head. It'd be too big a chance to take this early in their relationship. Perhaps another time. Cinder decided to keep the idea in the back of her mind, just in case it was needed at some point.

After some thought, she came to the conclusion that the best course of action probably involved pieces from all three. Whatever form that ended up taking, caution and care were of the utmost importance. She hardly wanted to share him - that was what this was all about, after all - but without question she'd take that over losing him any day of the week.

Cinder crossed her arms. This would take more planning than she'd originally thought.

Jaune put his pencil down with a sigh before stretching out with a yawn, extending his arms above his head. Nora and Ren were engaged in a one-sided conversation about some dream the former had the night before, but their last member was nowhere to be seen. Hadn't been since class, in fact. The three of them had initially worried, but ultimately decided that Pyrrha probably needed some space, could handle herself and would be back sooner or later. Of

course, that hadn't stopped Nora from going to look for her, but she'd come back after a few minutes claiming to have looked everywhere.

Dinner was going to be served in just a second, anyway, and he could count on seeing her there. They always ate at the same time with Team RWBY and Pyrrha hated missing things, even if they happened literally every day. I'd be fine.

"We should go down to dinner about now," he said to his teammates, glancing at the clock mounted on the wall. "I'd rather not get there too late."

Both of them got up, but neither changed the conversation. Nora kept rambling on while Ren kept listening to... whatever she was talking about now. Jaune admired his patience, truly he did.

Pyrrha finally showed up on their way out, holding a plate of food as she made her way back to the dorm. She froze at the sight of them and almost immediately turned her eyes to the floor, even as Nora ran up to her to ask where she'd been.

"I just wanted to be alone for a bit." Pyrrha looked down at the plate in shame, her eyes red and puffy. "I'm sorry."

Jaune stood a few feet in front of her. Suddenly, he didn't really feel like confronting her about eavesdropping, or whatever it was she'd supposedly done. "It's alright, Pyr. Are you sure you don't want to come eat with us in the cafeteria?"

His partner met his eyes and hesitated. "I'd rather be alone right now." She rushed to explain herself. "I appreciate the concern, but-"

He interrupted her before she could get going. "It's fine, Pyrrha. Seriously," he said, smiling at her, "Eat wherever you want." Pyrrha whispered a quiet "Thank you" before rushing off down the hall.

"Wait!" Nora yelled. "I'm coming with you!"

"Let her be, Nora." Ren's words silenced her. "She needs some time alone."

The girl stared after her fellow redhead with an open mouth. Eventually, she turned her head slowly back towards him and Ren, and the three of them continued on.

Chapter 15

Jaune's eyes, still heavy from sleep, opened slowly. The creaking hinges of their dormitory's front door had woken him up. He barely managed to lift his head, but saw a blurry mess of red leave the room, disappearing as soon as he processed it. It only caught up to him a moment later that that was his partner leaving.

His head fell back down on his pillow. He rubbed his eyes and turned over onto his side, reaching out to check the time on his scroll. The light nearly blinded him, but once his eyes had taken a few seconds to adjust, a tired groan escaped his lips. What kind of lunatic willingly woke up this early?

He rolled back onto his other side and flipped his pillow expecting to fall back asleep in no time, but that didn't happen. Instead, the better part of five minutes was spent trying to force his eyes closed. It must've been the light from his scroll. It'd shocked his senses awake and now they refused to shut down again.

And because of that, he'd have to go through the rest of his day on less than five hours of sleep... Lovely.

The sound of the shower shutting off made him realize that it was on in the first place. After a short period of confusion, he sat up and looked over to his left, seeing both Pyrrha and Ren's beds empty.

Psychos. His team was full of psychos.

At least Nora didn't wake up at... what time was it again? Oh yeah, four in the morning. Jaune felt almost amazed at that. Why anybody would choose to get out of bed at this unholy hour was an utter mystery to him.

Ren emerged fully clothed from the bathroom shortly after.

"What are you doing up this early, dude?" he asked, speaking at a regular volume. He wasn't too concerned about waking up Nora. That girl could sleep through anything.

"I always wake up at this time," Ren responded with a shrug. "You've never noticed?"

"No, because I get up at a normal time like a normal person. None of that four a.m. stuff for me." Jaune raised an eyebrow. "What do you even do this early, anyway?"

"Mostly just walk around. I find that the campus is quite peaceful before sunrise."

"That's it? Why not just sleep in with the rest of us?"

"I'm already adjusted to getting up when I do. There's not much room for extra sleep when you're a street urchin, and I see no reason to change it now."

Jaune rubbed his eyes with the bottoms of his palms. "Oh... yeah..."

"Anyways, I'm going to go for a walk. You can join me if you'd like."

His first instinct was to say no only based on the time, but once he thought about it a little more, he realized he wasn't getting back to sleep anyways and might as well talk to somebody. It'd be better than sitting around in bed for the better part of three hours. "Sure, why not? Let me get dressed real quick and I'll come back out and meet you." Ren nodded in agreement.

Jaune picked out a pair of clothes and headed to the bathroom to change out of his (very fashionable!) onesie before coming back out and leaving the dorm with Ren.

He wasn't lying when he said it was peaceful. The halls were completely silent outside the sound of their footsteps. He'd admit, it was nice. Not nice enough to get him out of bed at four a.m, but nice.

"So," he said, shutting the door behind him, "You and Pyrrha both always get up this early, or...?"

Ren nodded. "Pyrrha usually gets exercise in before classes start. I believe she's tried waking you up before to try and get you to go with her, but you wouldn't move."

That was impressive to him, but not very surprising. Mostly the part about Pyrrha exercising before classes, but the same could be said about his awe-inspiring ability to sleep.

"Well, I have been told I'm a heavy sleeper. And, uh... Speaking of Pyrrha," he said, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. "Did you talk to her this morning? Before she left, I mean."

Ren nodded. "I did."

"Did it seem like she was doing alright?"

"I think you already know the answer to that," he responded, sighing.

Jaune looked down at the floor. "Right, right..."

"You two still haven't talked about it yet, I take it?" Ren asked. Jaune shook his head. "You should go to her about that soon," he continued. "Oum knows Pyrrha won't go to *you* about it, anyways."

"You don't think so?" he said, confused.

"You should know by now how she is with confrontations. Nora was practically begging her to ask you out for a good month before she finally did, and it doesn't help with how distant you've been recently."

That was certainly news to Jaune. Not the part about Nora begging, he could believe that, but about him being distant. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you have been spending a lot of time with Cinder recently, and I think that's made Pyrrha upset. There's nothing wrong with that, of

course," he said, seeing his guilty expression. "I'm only trying to help explain her current mood. You've rejected her and now you're going off with other people, and I think she feels abandoned in a sense. It doesn't help that this is new to her, either. We both know she's had some trouble finding friends in the past. I'd be surprised if she's even been interested in someone like this before meeting you."

"Well, Oum, when you put it like that, I kind of feel like a dick..."

"Don't. Sometimes these things don't work out for certain people, and that's no fault of yours. Just try and talk to her soon. It'll only get harder and harder the more you wait."

Jaune nodded resolutely. "Alright, I will. I know I can't fix everything, but I can at least try. Thanks, Ren."

His teammate nodded along. The subject didn't come back for the rest of their walk.

Cinder approached JNPR's door smiling, her head held high. She knew it was still early, much too early for Jaune to answer, anyhow, but nothing else required her attention at the moment and it was worth checking just in case she could get a few extra hours with him out of it. Anything was worth that. Especially today.

Yes, she was extra excited about today. Not that any day with him didn't get her going, but today was going to be particularly special. If everything went well and she made the right moves, they'd be taking their relationship to the next level by the end of the evening. A consummation, you could call it. He was going to make her a *woman*.

That was why this date in particular had to go *perfectly*. She could tell that he was a bit old-fashioned when it came to romance, so he would need some encouragement if he was going to go all the way with her. What better way to encourage him than to take him on the perfect date?

The sound of her knuckles rapping against wood rang out through the building. She took a step back, holding her hands on her hips as she stood by. A rustling came from inside and a glimmer of optimism arose within her. Was that him? Or just one of his teammates?

A short moment went by as she waited patiently and unmoving. Then, he opened the door and his beautiful face finally greeted her. He looked surprised, but she imagined that was only because she'd shown up so early.

"Jaune! Oh, it's good to see you again," she said, leaning in to hug him. "I missed you."

Jaune laughed and shut the door behind him. "It hasn't even been a day, Cinder."

"That's more than long enough when it comes to you, darling." She pulled out of the hug, but kept her hands to either side of his waist. She more leaned out of it than anything. "You're up much earlier than usual. You didn't have a hard time sleeping, did you?"

"Oh, well I woke up an hour-something ago when my partner left the room, but I'm fine. Just a bit tired is all." The bags under his eyes certainly confirmed that.

Cinder looked at him with concern. "She didn't *mean* to wake you up, did she?"

"What? No." Jaune chuckled. "She knows I don't like getting up early."

He must've not realized that that's why she suggested Nikos would've done so, but she chose to move past it in favor of something more important. "Of course. Speaking of your partner, did you talk to her about yesterday?"

"I... well, no," he said, scratching the back of his neck. His tone quickened as he tried to explain himself. "I didn't want to start

anything, and she seemed upset enough already. Last night was a bad time."

"But you will confront her, right?"

Jaune paused. "I don't know. It's not a big deal, and the last thing either one of us needs right now is drama."

Cinder pursed her lips. He was too forgiving for his own good. He needed someone to show him how to deal with people who wronged him. "I appreciate that you want to keep the peace, but you can't ignore and rationalize every issue that comes up between you two. I'm trying to look out for you, Jaune."

His smile dropped a slight bit. "Thank you, Cinder, but I do think it's best if we just move on past this."

"Ask for an explanation at the very least. You deserve that much, don't you? Surely, it'll be better for you to know what's going on in her head."

Jaune hesitated and she knew she had him. "I... well, I guess that can't hurt..."

"See? Bring it up to her tonight, whatever mood she's in, and make sure you end the conversation knowing what went through her that made her follow us. I know it may be uncomfortable, but it's important."

"I still don't want to upset her. I mean, she's doing bad enough as it is..."

"It'll be better in the long run for both of you. *Trust* me, Jaune. You need to talk to her about it."

Her sweet darling frowned and looked off to the side. "Okay... But I'm only going to ask her why she did it. I'm not looking to start an argument over anything."

That worked for her. Jaune might not go into it trying to get into a fight, but Cinder was fairly confident he'd come out of it at least a little more detached from his partner. Nikos would try to justify herself, and if that didn't start an argument, whatever she said would at least shake his confidence in her. Cinder would be surprised if her advice actually helped the two's relationship.

She smiled reassuringly. "That's all I'm asking you to do. Now, let's get on with our day. There's a spot in the city I'd like to take you to, and we've plenty of time before my teammate arrives, so don't worry about that."

Jaune seemed to ease up at that, which she was certainly glad to see.

Yes, today would be magical indeed.

Neo's bullhead was just about to land by the time the two of them arrived. Unlike when they'd left, students now milled around the campus and landing spots, the sun having come up a few hours ago.

She was getting here early. Too early. Cinder had only gotten around an hour with her beloved before they'd had to come back up to Beacon. She'd tried telling him that Neo wasn't as important as he was, but he'd insisted they go to meet her and resume their date afterwards. Obviously, they would've had to leave at some point even if Neo had come later, but that failed to make her any less frustrated. She couldn't show that to Jaune, though.

Cinder narrowed her eyes as the vehicle came to rest. Most of the passengers that began filing out looked to be more exchange students, but she had little interest in any of them. Finally, in the back of the group, came Neo, disguised as this "Mint" character and staring back at her with a smug smirk. She managed to suppress an angry scowl and approached her, making sure Jaune followed close behind.

"Mint... I'm so glad to see you could make it so early," she said through clenched teeth before fixing her posture and standing up straight. "Jaune, this is my teammate, Mint. Mint, this is Jaune, my boyfriend."

Smiling, Jaune extended a hand out to shake hers, and the height difference almost made her laugh. "Nice to meet you, Mint." The two engaged in a brief handshake, Jaune having to bend down to do so.

Neo feigned flattery, putting her hand up against her chest and tilting her head to the side with a very cruel looking grin. Cinder's hands clenched into fists. She had to bite down on her tongue to stop herself from snapping at her and encouraging the little demon.

"Jaune," she said, turning to him and putting a hand on his shoulder. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to talk to my teammate in private. You don't mind if we take a moment to ourselves, do you?"

He shook his head. "Not at all! Go ahead."

"Thank you, darling." She lifted herself by her toes and leaned in to give him a kiss on the cheek. "Stay here and I'll come right back for you as soon as I'm done with her."

"No need to rush. I'm not gonna run away from you," he joked.

Cinder gave him one last smile before signalling for Neo to follow her and bringing her off to the side. Once they'd walked far enough that nobody else would be able to hear them, she crossed her arms and began speaking. "Let's get this straight before anything else. You're only here right now so that I can keep an eye on you. You'll be plenty useful during the actual attack, but until then, I want you out of the way of my business and within my sight. Got that?"

Neo made a strange motion that looked vaguely like she was laughing before nodding along.

"And as for Jaune," she continued, "I don't want to see you interact with him. I don't even want to see you near him. Do whatever you want to any of the other students short of what gets us caught, but he is above that. Keep yourself away from him. Believe me, you don't want to know what I'll do if you don't."

The thief sat there, her expression unchanging and her body still. Cinder searched her face for any emotion but couldn't find anything beyond some wicked amusement.

"I don't have the time to sit here trying to decipher you. Head to the dorm. I've already sent your directions on how to get there through your scroll."

Without another word, she turned away from her "teammate" without waiting for any kind of response and headed back in Jaune's direction. As she did, she noticed that he was standing completely alone. Of course, that much would've been obvious to her even before turning around if she'd thought about it for a second, but seeing it made her feel rather guilty.

She bit at the end of her thumb. Would he be upset at her? Did he think she was abandoning him or choosing her teammate over him? She couldn't blame him if he did. In a sense, that's what had happened, after all. Her body began to shake. Oh Oum, he wasn't upset at her, was he?

"I apologize for that," she said, adopting a calm smile and flicking a lock of hair behind her back. "Something I had to take care of."

Jaune shook his head. "It's no problem. Don't worry about it."

Cinder looked down at her feet in shame. "Still, it didn't feel right to just... leave you here."

"Like I said, Cinder, it's not a big deal," he responded, putting a hand on her shoulder. "It was barely five minutes."

"Five minutes too long," she muttered. "You deserve someone who will stick by your side. I'm sorry for not doing that."

Jaune blinked and opened and closed his mouth as if trying to process her words. "Seriously, Cinder... it's fine. You were just talking to your friend for a bit. Nothing to get upset about."

Cinder ignored his forgiveness and continued on, lightly gripping at either side of his waist. "I promise I won't do something like that again."

"Haha, yeah..." Jaune faked a laugh in an attempt to move on. "Uh, anyway... where to next?"

She cleared her throat, taking the hint. "Yes, let's talk about that."

Cinder walked through the hall side-by-side with Jaune, her hand wrapped around his arm and her mouth curled upward in a soft smile, one that he reciprocated. Not to go unnoticed was their footsteps falling perfectly in-sync with each other. Outside, the moon shone bright overhead, illuminating what the street lamps didn't with a soft glow.

Their day together had been *exhilarating* .

After dealing with Neo, they'd gone to this quaint little coffee shop a bit outside the city, where they held hands and talked for an hour or two. It felt so special, being able to sit there and admire him. No one else to interrupt them or take his attention away, only her and her beloved. She could still feel the squeeze he'd given her as they got up to leave lingering on her left hand.

And then came the countryside. She'd never really noticed how quickly the city transitioned into farmland, but Jaune insisted they go, and how could she say no? It'd been such a simple experience, walking through those rolling hills, but he made it unforgettable. He

was so happy. She'd *made* him so happy, and the way he looked at her - she knew, with all her being, that he loved her.

She wouldn't have traded that for the world.

But their night wasn't over. She wouldn't let it end quite yet.

"I'm so glad we got to spend the day together," she said, breaking the silence. "You really know how to show me a good time." The words were only half-teasing.

Jaune turned his head to look over at her. "I'm glad I could make you happy." He spoke simply, but his voice was warm and comforting, like velvet against skin.

Cinder stopped in her tracks, turning him towards her as she did so. She hadn't done it randomly. On the contrary, she was very deliberate in where she stopped him. They now stood right in front of her dorm. "I don't want this to end quite yet. You'll come back to my dorm with me, right? To keep me company?"

"Sure, I've got time," he said, smiling. There was nothing, not in his voice, not in his body language, to suggest any kind of hesitation.

He wants this. He wants this as much as I do, she thought to herself. The idea sent a shiver down her spine.

Cinder reached over to turn the knob and opened the door, revealing an empty, tidy room. For a moment, she regretted not doing something to fancy it up a little to turn it into something he deserved, but decided to not dwell on it. "Please, come in."

As he did, she turned the lock behind him, a low clicking noise ringing through her dorm. "Make yourself comfortable," she said, placing a hand on his back.

Her beloved awkwardly looked around before seating himself on her bed, resting his arms on his legs. Cinder joined him right away,

sitting down right next to him so that their shoulders rubbed together. "Thank you for coming back with me, Jaune."

"Sure, Cinder. I'm glad to spend more time with you," he responded with a smile. Her heart melted and burned a hole through her chest.

"T-thank you. Look, I..." She breathed in and puffed her chest out, sitting up straight and pausing for a second. "Can we talk about something?"

Her husband-to-be turned back towards her and looked her in the eyes. "Yeah, what's up?"

Instead of responding with words, Cinder smiled at him before turning to her other side and reaching for the bedside table. She slid the drawer out and pulled out her latest purchase: a leash and a collar. They'd been a hassle to get her hands on the night before, but it would be worth it.

Jaune stared as she held the items up in separate hands for him to see, an almost proud expression on her face. She patiently awaited for a reaction - perhaps excitement or nervous enthusiasm - but all he gave her was a raised eyebrow and a small frown. "What's, uhh... What's that?"

Her expression remained unchanging. "This is for you, of course. To wear when we have sex."

His eyes widened. "W-what?!"

"You don't like it?" Cinder frowned for a second, then quickly shook her head and smiled again. "Well, I understand if you want to keep things slow for our first time. If that's the case, we can just-"

"N-no, it's not *that*. "

She looked at him, concerned. "What's the matter, Jaune? I haven't startled you, have I?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but then took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "S-sorry, I didn't mean to shout like that. You took me off-guard is all. Look, Cinder, I..." He sighed, his posture dipping just enough to be noticeable. "I like you, but I don't know if I'm ready for something like that. And, uh, yeah, the collar... doesn't really help."

Her mind barely processed the words. How could he not be ready for that? He loved her, didn't he?

"Wh... what do you mean you're not ready?" She looked down at herself, her expression troubled, trying to find some flaw. "Am I not pretty enough? I spent a lot of time-"

Jaune reached out to her, as if to calm her down. In fact, that's probably exactly what he was trying to do. "No! Cinder, you're *beautiful*. Gorgeous! You're plenty attractive, I'm just... really not ready to go that far yet."

Hm... Maybe he only needed more encouragement, then. Or to try it out. Yes, that was exactly it. Once he got a taste for it, he'd realize he'd made a mistake and rush to correct himself.

"Are you *sure* you don't want to?" She placed a hand on his cheek. "We don't have to go *all* the way if you don't want to. We can just, you know, explore... A-and the collar could be fun if you give it a chance!"

"I appreciate that you see me like that, but I don't really want to do anything past... what we've already done." A noise came from him that sounded somewhere between a wince and a whine. "And sorry, but it's a no on the collar."

"I'm *sure* if you give it a chance-" Cinder extended her arms out towards him with the object in her hand, and would have succeeded in putting it on him if he hadn't pulled away.

"S-seriously, Cinder! I don't want to put that thing on!" he said, jumping back and straightening his arms out in front of him.

Reluctantly, she sighed and put the collar aside. "Alright, if you're certain..."

"I am..."

Well, then... Now what? She had thought for certain that he'd be eager and didn't exactly plan anything else in case his mind wasn't in the same place.

At least he hadn't rejected her. He wasn't ready, that was all.

Still, it did kind of hurt...

"Cinder? Are you alright?"

She snapped back into the moment. "O-oh, yes, of course. Only a bit... surprised. B-but that's okay!" She quickly closed the distance he'd created and scooted closer, putting both hands on his shoulders. "So... You're free tomorrow, right? We should go out again."

"Actually, I've got plans with my friends tomorrow. How about another time?"

Her breath stopped momentarily. "P... plans?" she said, hoping to have misheard him. "With your friends?"

Jaune suddenly looked concerned. "Yeah... i-is that alright?"

She hardly processed what was coming out of his mouth. This... didn't make any sense. First, he'd rejected her advances, and now he was turning her down for his friends? No, in fact, that was *not* alright.

Cinder swallowed the lump that was growing in her throat, pushing down the panic that took hold of her stomach. "H-how many of your

friends are involved in that?"

"Well, there's my team, plus Yang will probably drag along her own, so... seven, give or take."

"Seven people is plenty," she said matter-of-factly, barely keeping her voice from shaking. "They can go without you, and you and I can go on another date. There's still plenty of places in the city I'd like to take you to that I'm sure will be a great time."

His mouth hung open as she spoke, surprise prevalent in his eyes. "I'm sure it will be, Cinder, b-but I already promised them I'd go. And I asked in the first place, too. I can't ask them to do something and then back out at the last second."

It was like being stabbed.

He couldn't go with them. He couldn't turn her down, he just couldn't! His friends had no right to take him from her like this! What made them think they were worthy of even breathing the same *air* as him? No... no, no, no, she had to fix this. She had to convince him to stay with her.

Cinder tightened her grip on his shoulders and brought him closer, their faces inches apart. "Jaune... You're not actually going to leave me alone, are you?"

He tried pulling away, but she didn't allow him. "I... I don't want you to feel *alone*, Cinder, but I can't ignore everyone else in my life. Look, I can come visit you early tomorrow, or later after I'm back. Do you want me to do that?"

It wasn't enough.

His eyes were full of sympathy and understanding, but he didn't understand. Didn't understand how precious he was to her, how much she needed him beside her, how his friends were stopping him

from being happy with her. Didn't understand why she couldn't let him go.

"Jaune, I *need* you here. I-I know it might seem strange, but... but..." Her vision became obscured by tears, only half-forced, forming at her eyelids. "I... I get this feeling when you're not here, and I can't stand it. But you make everything so much *better!*"

Her words were hardly sophisticated, but he seemed to consider them, his lips forming a frown as he did. "I... I'm sorry, but-"

Without warning, her arms flew around him. " *Please!* " She dug her fingernails into his back, pressing her face into his chest and gripping him as though the sky would open up and take him if she didn't hold onto him. "Y-you can't leave me alone!"

He looked back at her, shocked and worried, but said nothing.

"I... I *promise* I'll make you happy. *Please*, Jaune!" The shaking of her voice surprised her, but not enough to make her try to stop. "Please come with me tomorrow." She unburied her face from his chest and looked up at him through blurry vision. He looked back, eyebrows raised and concern in his eyes.

Slowly, he swallowed and opened his mouth. "O-okay. But I can't do this again."

Her grip tightened. Cinder erupted into sobbing, tears running down her face as her smile grew. "T- *thank you*," she said, whispering into his ear. "Thank you, Jaune. I love you. I-I'll never forget this."

They sat like that, arms wrapped around each other, for some amount of time. Cinder was too happy and too invested in his touch to pay attention to how long that ended up being, but it seemed like a while. Still, by the time her grip had loosened enough for him to separate himself, it hadn't been long enough.

"I'm going to go now, Cinder," he said, taking a deep breath. "You're, uh... you're gonna be alright without me, right?"

She wiped the last of her undried tears and beamed. "Yes. Yes, of course. Just don't leave me alone too long, okay?"

"Right, right..."

Her lover got up from the bed and moved sluggishly towards the door, facing her the entire time as if to make sure she didn't break down again. His concern, his *feeling*, was like a drug. He paused for a second before opening the door, but her expression never changed.

"Jaune?"

"... Yeah?"

Cinder breathed in deeply and exhaled. "I love you."

He looked down at the floor and hesitated. "I love you too."

With that, Jaune turned the knob and left, shutting the door behind him. A silence fell on the room.

Now alone, Cinder sat cross-legged on her bed, resting her chin on the palms of her hands. Her eyes fell on the wall, but her attention stayed with Jaune.

He'd been harder to convince than she'd initially expected, but that was okay. He wasn't entirely ready to let go of his friends yet. She would help him get there, help him truly understand. He'd realize this was all best for him, all for his own good.

He'd be happy. They would be happy together, without anyone else to stop it.

Now, since he wasn't here anymore, she'd have to... relieve her frustration on her own.

Jaune closed the door behind him with a sigh.

He hadn't realized how... emotional Cinder was. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing in and of itself, in fact he'd prefer a girl with some sensitivity, but she was, like... *really* emotional, and he didn't exactly know how to respond to that kind of thing.

Briefly, he wondered whether she actually cared about him that much or if there was something else going on. It must've had something to do with her past. Trauma hardly ever *didn't* have lasting effects, right? And it didn't seem like she had the best relationships with her teammates, so maybe she really was that lonely and didn't know how to express it without breaking down.

Whatever the case, he felt more sympathy for her than anything. It had to be hard living with that.

Maybe he could help her. Not by spending every day with her or anything like that, but there had to be *something* he could do for her, right? Help her get on better terms with her team, possibly? Or was that none of his business? Either way, he couldn't let her suffer alone.

"Yo, Vomit Boy!"

Jaune turned to see Yang, the last user of that dreaded nickname, headed towards him.

"Hey, Yang," he said with a sigh.

A sly smile grew on her face. "So your new girlfriend finally let you off the leash, huh?" She playfully punched him on the arm, but all she got in response was a look of confusion. "I'm talking about that text from earlier today."

Jaune's stomach dropped slightly, as if he'd just been caught doing something he wasn't supposed to. "O-oh, yeah that..." He awkwardly

lifted one finger out in front of him and did his best to smile in a way that made it seem like no big deal. "See, about that... I... Can't really do that anymore. Bit of a scheduling conflict, haha... Maybe another time."

A brief silence fell between them as Yang narrowed her eyes. "A scheduling conflict?"

"... Yes."

She shook her head. "Dick move, Vomit Boy. Dick move." Her tone seemed more disappointed than angry. In some ways, that was worse.

"Yeah, uh... Cinder wanted to see me tomorrow, so I had to change up my plans." His attempt to explain himself didn't seem to have the intended effect.

Yang tsked. "Some scheduling conflict. Ah, whatever," she said, waving her hand, "Just make sure you let everyone else know."

"Yeah, will do." Jaune turned to leave, but she stopped him again only a few steps down the hall.

"Yo, Jaune, what the hell happened to your back?"

He looked back at her, seeing an expression of confusion on her face. To her credit, he didn't know what happened to his back, either, nor did he know why she was asking.

Now that she mentioned it, though, it did kind of sting.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, bending his arms behind him to try and feel his back. The contact only made the stinging worse. When he brought his hand back out in front of him, he saw a slight bit of red on his fingers.

Yang's confusion became concern. "Are you bleeding?"

It seemed like a stupid question, but Jaune found himself wondering the same thing. "Am I?"

He remembered Cinder hugging him, and suddenly it made sense. Actually, it'd be more accurate to say she clawed him. And he didn't activate his aura, because why would he think to do that in her bedroom...

Yang raised an eyebrow. "Uh, yeah, you are. The hell happened?"

Jaune opened his mouth and closed it again, trying to figure out how to say it. "Uh... Cinder hugged me."

"You're bleeding out of your back because Cinder... Sorry, you said because Cinder *hugged* you?"

"It was a really hard hug," he said, wincing.

Yang stared at him with a look of astonishment. "Let me get this straight," she said, waving her hands out in front of her, "You visit Cinder, come out of her dorm bleeding, and now you have to cancel your plans for her? And you say you're bleeding because she hugged you hard?"

"*Really* hard," he corrected. "But yeah."

"Oh..." Her astonishment suddenly turned to concern before she put a hand on his shoulder. "Look, uh... if you ever need, y'know, help... I'm here for you."

"O-okay? Thanks?"

"Yeah..." Yang awkwardly nodded and put her hand back down at her side. "Actually, I gotta go meet with my team, but... you got friends, alright?" With that, she turned, hesitantly, and walked back down the hall.

Well, that was certainly strange.

Seriously, what was with everyone today? Waking up at four a.m, scratching his back off, acting like... however you would describe that.

Jaune sighed.

Whatever. Time to get some bandages or something before his team saw him.