

Cinderella's Obsession

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Destiny is a tricky thing. Especially when a fate encounter between Jaune and a servant girl, whose life has been nothing short of a living hell, leads to a rather unhealthy obsession with the male Arc. A single act of kindness can lead to a twisted destiny. And Cinder has no intentions of letting her knight in shining armor go. Jaune x Yandere! Cinder

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Prologue

This was inspired by Talilover's story "Normal Reactions? Fat Chance". When they posted that the RWBY fandom seemed to have a yandere drought, I somehow got motivated to write whatever this is. So yeah, a yandere-ish Cinder x Jaune story. I added the -ish because after looking up various kinds of yandere personalities, this version of Cinder won't be the "I'm going to stab you because I love you" kind. Rather, she's going to be a mix of suuhai-gata (worship), ison-gata (dependence), shuumatsu-gata (final type), and jiko-gisei-gata (self-sacrifice) by borrowing aspects from these kinds of yandere. Let's see what the result will be!

" Pathetic. You spilled tea while serving a customer. You made a fool out of yourself. You disgraced the hotel."

Cinder howled in pain. Electricity erupted from her collar, travelling down her entire body in a flash. Her nerves felt like they were on fire. She twitched and shrieked. There was just so much pain. The young girl shut her eyes, trying to grit her teeth in an attempt to subdue her screams. The Madame didn't like it when she made too much noise - punishments included.

The much older woman loomed over her. A cruel, sadistic witch who found subtle pleasure in depraved acts such as torture. She liked to see Cinder squirm; to see her suffer.

" Please... stop!" The pained howl escaped her lips, as a testament to the immense pain she was experiencing.

The shocks paused briefly. "Making demands, are we? A useless girl like doesn't get to demand anything from me."

Another surge of electricity. Cinder's eyes were filled with tears as she fell on the ground. How much more would she endure like this? There was no one there to help her, just like at the orphanage. She'd been ridiculed there too. All she was ever good for were menial tasks, or to serve someone else in some way or another. Cinder tried her hardest. She did everything they asked of her.

And yet, no one cared. Not the kids at the orphanage. Not the Madame. Not her stepsisters. Not even Rhodes!

Cinder didn't register the fact that the collar was no longer active. Her mind was too hazy from all the pain. She remained motionless, muscles twitching occasionally against her will, and stayed silent. Her breathing was labored. She tried to open her eyes again, and flinched as the Madame made eye contact with her.

" Utterly useless. Why I bothered to take you in, I can't remember nor fathom." The woman sneered. Her dismissive, cold gaze was just like the others. Everyone either looked at her in disgust or disinterest. Like she didn't matter. Cinder whimpered pitifully. "Stay here and think of what you've done. While you're at it, think of a decent apology. Otherwise you'll spend the evening without dinner, girl."

The clacking of heels announced the Madame's departure from the storage room. Cinder was left all alone, as always.

She hissed through gritted teeth as she got up slowly. Her arms trembled with the little strength she had left in her limbs. All of her muscles ached, and her head was pounding. Cinder moved into a sitting position, leaning her back against the wall. Several minutes of pure silence passed by.

She was so tired; both mentally and physically. The punishments were nothing new, sadly. Having been beaten from a young age, Cinder was used to the treatment. It still hurt, obviously, but no longer like it used to. The mental damage was also something that her mind had accustomed to. She no longer cried herself to sleep at

night. How could she, when there were no tears left? No, it was the utter despair and hopelessness that drained her.

Not even her goal to become a huntress seemed feasible anymore. Despite the progress she'd made under Rhodes' tutelage, practicing both her semblance and combat skills, she could no longer see the light at the end of the tunnel. There was no point in working towards such a faraway goal. Besides, what would she do with her new freedom? All Cinder had ever known was servitude. As the Madame constantly reminded her, without a person to work for, she was nothing.

Just a sad, little girl who couldn't survive on her own.

Cinder grunted as she rubbed the abused skin of her throat. Frankly, it was a wonder none of the visitors had ever noticed the abuse that went on in the hotel. Her sisters weren't exactly subtle in their attempted torture. But as she'd learned a long time ago, most people simply didn't care. Especially the wealthy elite that regularly visited the hotel. As long as they could live happily in their own pleasant world, they saw no need to get involved with an insignificant peasant like her.

She looked out of the window on the other side of the room, gaze drawn to the shattered moon of Remnant. Cinder didn't know what to do; either fight or give up. The imaginary shackles binding her were causing her to sink deeper into the abyss. Despair gnawed at her, taunting the raven-haired girl in every passing moment. All of these negative thoughts fueled the headache she was having right now. Her hands were clenched into fists so hard, she almost drew blood from her nails digging into her palms.

When would this living nightmare end? Forget freedom or revenge. Cinder wanted to be happy! To have a purpose in life that didn't inflict sorrow; one that wasn't so far away from her reach.

" Hey! Are you alright?"

Cinder froze. She slowly turned to the right, spotting an open hand that reached out to her. The servant girl didn't understand the gesture. No one had ever offered something like this, and Cinder couldn't wrap her head around the concept as a result.

As she raised her head, her golden eyes locked on to the most beautiful blue orbs she'd ever seen. They were a deep blue, much like the ocean she'd only seen in picture books or videos. Somehow she felt at ease when she looked into those pools. The throbbing pain dulled faster than ever before, and instead she focused on this boy. He was short, meaning he was younger than her. Cinder could see it in his innocent eyes. His blonde, messy hair framed his youthful face.

The boy tilted his head to the side, probably wondering why she didn't react. So he smiled. It was a smile meant to put her at ease, but for Cinder, who had never been shown such a wonderful sight of friendship, it was so much more than that. It was a smile that was etched into her memory, so she would never forget it in her entire life.

" Don't worry. You can trust me. Mom always says strangers are just friends you haven't met yet. And I'd like to be friends with a pretty girl like you!"

Pretty? Cinder had never considered herself to be pretty. Broken; useless; dirty. Those were the words associated with her. Yet this boy wanted to be friends. He even called her pretty!

Cinder reached out, and took his hand.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

The alarm burst into flames on the wooden nightstand. Its horrible noise was quickly silenced; a suitable punishment for interrupting the most cherished memory in her life. Besides, there was no serious harm done aside from losing a single device, which they could easily

replace. With a quick use of her half-maiden powers, the fire disappeared instantly.

Sweeping back her long dark hair, Cinder Fall got out of bed. That little girl had blossomed into a true beauty. One that held far more power than she did back then. After all, without power, she could not meet her knight in shining armor.

"Good morning, ma'am."

Emerald's voice was just the tiniest bit apprehensive. Her partner, Mercury, didn't say anything at all. He was more focused on the burnt alarm. Ah, maybe she'd been somewhat rash. Cinder had built up the persona of a calm, cunning woman who got what she wanted either through subtle deduction, or veiled threats and promises. It was how she'd secured these two's loyalty. It wouldn't do well for her plans if they thought of her as anything else but that.

Then again, Cinder could never stay too rational when it came to her knight.

"Good morning. I hope you're ready for today's activities, you two." She said, making it evident that not a word was to be spoken about the alarm clock.

Luckily they caught on rapidly. "Of course. We're to mingle with the other students. That way we can establish connections, and gather information for our goals."

"Yeah, we understand." Mercury nodded along. Not even he dared to say anything otherwise. "And if anyone asks about our other teammate, we'll just say she'll be joining us later along the semester."

Hmm, acceptable. They were getting better at remembering orders. Neo hadn't joined their little team, seeing as Roman still had need of her. It was only during the Vytal tournament that they'd need her anyway. Roman could keep his little helper - for now.

Cinder stood up, and walked over to her wardrobe to get changed. As a student, she was required to wear her Haven uniform for the most part. At least during lessons. Beacon wasn't so strict as to demand that the students wore them all the time. Just during lessons and other school activities that required the formal dress, while free time and combat lessons could be spent wearing regular outfits. That meant she wouldn't be wearing her dress.

A shame. Aside from drawing out her beauty to charm targets, Cinder wanted to look nice for when she'd be reunited with her knight. He was the main reason she put so much effort in her appearance. Then again, that boy - probably a man by now - was usually her motivation for about anything she did, really. Every action she'd ever taken was for *him* .

She'd broken free from the Glass Unicorn to find him. She'd joined Salem to search for him. She'd taken the Fall maiden's powers to be strong for him.

At first, she'd tried to look for him herself. Those efforts had been... largely unsuccessful. The blonde angel hadn't told her where he came from. And describing his appearance to a random passerby wouldn't get her results, of course. There was little she knew about him, but that didn't stop Cinder from loving him. Still, it was frustrating to be so far away from him, for such a long time.

All she had to go with was a single name, which was naturally the most perfect name ever; Jaune.

Only a first name. Back then, she hadn't thought of asking for a last name. At least it was something. Salem had promised to look out for anyone named Jaune, mostly by assigning Watts to perform this task. The snobby scientist had made fun of her adoration for her perfect knight though. The relationship between herself and him was shaky at best, and outright hostile at worst. It wasn't rare for him to take jabs at her. However, he'd learned very quickly that Jaune was a subject best left *untouched* . Not even Tyrian dared to mock her

affection, especially after her rampage. Only Salem had managed to calm the young woman down.

Gods, why couldn't she just be with Jaune? Was Watts really that incompetent, or had Salem ordered him to delay his findings? At this point, she was beginning to consider the latter. The mere thought of being kept away from on purpose filled her with a cold, intense anger. But staying with the ancient queen of the Grimm served her purpose for now, so she'd play the part of the obedient servant.

Cinder finished buttoning up her jacket, and took another good look at herself. Her appearance was impeccable, as usual. She could feel Emerald's longing gaze drilling holes in the back of her head. Poor girl. As useful and obedient as she was, Emerald could hardly measure up to the handsome knight who'd saved Cinder all those years ago. Then again, no one could. But the girl's misplaced love made it easy enough to control. So she would allow it.

"We shall have breakfast first." Cinder said, as they left the dorms. Students were roaming the hallways, but almost all of them were going in the same direction. "Do not stand out. That means no pickpocketing, and not starting any fights."

"Understood, ma'am."

They looked nervous. It was a given, seeing as she was referring to their little 'mess' with that Faunus turncoat. Roman should have taken care of that problem, but alas. Apparently the thief was still being unruly. Were he not essential to her plans, she would have taught him a lesson he'd never forget. Nothing would stand in her way to obtaining the Maiden's powers, and thus stepping closer to her ultimate goal in the long run - being with Jaune.

"I heard there was this big food fight a week or two ago." Mercury spoke up, breaking the silence.

"Really? You're telling me that a bunch of teenage students, who are training to become huntsmen and huntresses in order to fight savage

beasts, had a food fight of all things?" Emerald raised an eyebrow, doubtful of his claims.

The sole boy of their entourage shrugged his shoulders. "Hey, I heard it from a couple of other transfer students. Then I confirmed the story by asking several Beacon students, so it's legit. Rumors spread fast around here. Especially when said fight turned the entire cafeteria into a warzone. Broken vending machines, broken pillars - a broken roof!"

"How did they break the roof? Wait, never mind." Emerald shook her head. "We're talking about kids with lots of dust and flashy semblances. Of course they'd find a way. And here I thought we'd be mingling with reasonable people, rather than children."

Even though Emerald was practically the same age as them, Cinder noted. She didn't comment on the matter though. What the students did during lunch time held no interest to her. Still, it was good to hear that her underlings were already at work, trying to gather information. Knowing how the rumor mill in the school worked would also be an advantage.

The teachers in this school had little control over their students, it seemed. The only teacher who commanded respect, aside from the headmaster himself on certain occasions, was Glynda Goodwitch. Cinder knew this for certain. Their information on the staff at Beacon was solid. Not only did they have dossiers on almost all associates of Ozpin, but she'd also done her own research before coming here. Not that it had been hard. On the contrary - Lionheart had been *most* accommodating, by providing all there was to know about the teachers.

Before long they reached the cafeteria. Cinder walked inside, her presence immediately drawing the eyes of many. Gazes filled with lust and jealousy sized her up as she passed several tables by. Plenty of males - and females too - looked at her with desire, fantasizing what it would be like to be at her side.

None of them would ever get that chance though. There was only one man worthy of being her special someone. Any student foolish enough to approach her with romantic intentions, either pure or selfish, would face her wrath.

Cinder claimed a table close to the wall, where they could see plenty yet remain inconspicuous. She didn't want to draw too much attention to herself. While her enemies were still unaware of her arrival at Beacon, she had no intentions whatsoever to take risks. For now, her focus was reconnaissance. Gathering information on other students in order to spot possible Maiden candidates. And maybe, just maybe, she'd find her beloved knight among this annoying rabble.

She sighed longingly, resting her head on the smooth palm of her hand.

"Is everything alright, Cinder?" Emerald asked. When in public, it was best to drop the titles.

"Nothing to concern yourself with. Everything's under control, as always." She responded coolly. "Mercury, retrieve our meals. I trust you can do this much."

The assassin grimaced, but did as he was told. "Sure thing, boss. I'll see if they've got any dog food for Emerald. Wouldn't want our resident puppy to feel left out."

"Why you arrogant piece-"

"Enough." They stopped with a single command. Cinder's golden eyes froze them into place. "It hasn't been an hour since I told you not to start anything unnecessary. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I distinctively remember hearing that you understood."

Her underlings looked away, radiating discomfort. Good. Fear of what she could do to them, in case they displeased her severely, would get them back in line. She waved Mercury away, and gave

him another look to warn against doing anything reckless. Luckily the silver-haired clown got the message.

"Sorry for what happened, Cinder. I'll try to be on my best behavior from now on." Emerald said.

"We shall see."

The girl nodded, but smiled slightly at the more relaxed tone. It was easy to keep her docile. Cinder understood Emerald better than she herself did, and it was obvious to see how even the smallest form of attention or affection motivated the former thief.

Cinder watched the students to distract herself. Most of the gathered teens were either first or second years, as far as she could tell. The third years had more free time, due to the fewer lessons they had. This meant that plenty of their numbers were still fast asleep. She carefully analyzed the students that were present, picking out those who stood out.

A few teams were known to her. Cinder kept track of those who could prove to be troublesome in the future, or who were already known for their combat prowess. Naturally, the list of such groups was very small. They were just children, who knew nothing of what the real world was like. They dressed up in flashy clothes, dyed their hair in bright colors and wielded crazy weaponry; nothing like true huntsmen. Almost as if none of these students had any common sense whatsoever.

"Isn't that Weiss Schnee, heiress to the SDC?" Emerald asked, looking pointedly to the side.

Cinder followed her gaze, and spotted the Atlesian elite. Her lips almost curled into a sneer out of pure instinct, showing her distaste for the Schnee girl's kind. Unwanted memories of the hotel resurfaced without her consent. Were it not for her precious memory of Jaune, she might have shown more emotion. However, Cinder

was an expert in hiding her true thoughts, and quickly put her mask on again.

"So it would seem. And she seems to be partnered with Ruby Rose; the girl responsible for Roman's botched heists." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, speaking low enough to avoid detection. "Both of them are possible targets. As for the rest of their team, only the Belladonna girl is of interest - if only because of her family's status. The blonde is unimportant."

And yet, maybe they should look into team RWBY a bit further. While possible a coincidence, the team was made out of interesting figures. A girl with silver eyes; the heiress to the largest dust company on Remnant; the daughter of Menagerie's leadership. Cinder wouldn't put it past Ozpin to have put these girls together on purpose, in order to nurture them into powerful allies. Or, well, *tools* to be more precise. Maybe the blonde one was also of interest somehow...

What was far more important, however, was their team's relationship with Pyrrha Nikos. The champion fighter was incredibly recognizable, and was sat at the same table as team RWBY. Due to her skill as a prodigy, Nikos was a logical choice for the enemy to pick as the next Fall maiden. She would need Emerald and Mercury to befriend those children. The more information they could gather, the better their chances of success.

Nikos' team was anything but remarkable. Cinder saw a ginger-haired girl stuff her face with pancakes, talking with such fervor and volume that she could hear the noise from here, while a dark-haired boy ate his meal in silence. Judging by the clothes he wore, he was native to Mistral. She shook her head. Putting random nobodies on the team of a renowned fighter such as Nikos seemed like a waste to her. She shifted her gaze to the final member of the team, spotting the second blonde at the table and-

Cinder gasped loudly. Her heart skipped a beat, did a somersault and almost crashed entirely. Her eyes were wide open - almost to a

ludicrous degree, in fact. It felt as if someone had punched in the gut. She could barely breathe.

"Cinder? Are you okay?"

Emerald's concern fell on deaf ears. But no, she was not okay. Because she could see *him* .

His hair was still that perfect shade of gold, blinding her with his beauty. The childish looks in her memories no longer matched the handsome, older features he had now. But that made him all the more attractive. The final killing blow to her already racing heart were his perfect eyes. A familiar deep blue, which regularly graced her dreams to put her at ease.

It was Jaune. He was here!

Cinder didn't know what to do. Her mind was simply overwhelmed with joy, happiness, anxiety and desire. The carefully constructed façade she'd made was crumbling away, with each passing second that she looked at her idol. He seemed so happy, sitting there with his friends. Jealousy surged like magma rising to the surface as he laughed along with a joke from the blonde *bimbo* sat opposite of him.

"C-cinder?"

She finally drew her sight away from teams RWBY and JNPR, only to see Emerald stare at her as if she'd grown a second head. Using the little restraint she had left, Cinder stood up.

"I'll be back shortly. There is something I need to take care of."

Her speech was short and tense. Emerald obviously wanted to come along, or at the very least know what was wrong, but Cinder had no patience for the girl right now. She stormed off; no regality to her pose whatsoever. Students made way for her, which saved them from being burned to a crisp. Cinder didn't feel like she was in

control. Her heart was beating faster than ever, and her head was pounding.

She needed to be alone. Somewhere secluded. A place where no one would find her.

As she marched through Beacon's hallways, she came across a girls restroom. With almost all students still at the cafeteria, Cinder took her chance. She went inside, and shut the door behind her while making sure it was locked. No one was in here. She checked the stalls just to be safe. Only when she was certain that not a single soul had followed her here, or that someone could find her, did she allow the mask to finally slip away. She braced herself against the lavatory, staring at the large mirror.

"It's him, it's him, it's him, it's him, it's him, it's him, it's him himhimhimhimhim!"

The cool and collected woman from earlier was nowhere to be seen. Cinder peered into the glass, golden eyes filled with desire and love. Her lips formed a lucid smile as she gushed audibly over her soulmate. She palmed her cheeks; a single, slender finger slipping in between her full lips as she softly bit on it. Reason and logic abandoned the ravenette. Her breathing was heavy; husky too.

Her sweet, handsome Jaune was here at Beacon! Cinder had hoped - *wished* even for this to happen! Oh, her brave knight. Just the mere sight of him was enough to make her emotions run wild, like a rampaging Goliath. He'd changed so much, and yet so little in all those years. Was he still kind? So full of love? Cinder didn't mind if he was broodier or gloomier, despite his earlier behavior suggesting otherwise. After all, it was impossible to find any fault in Jaune. He was perfect. The perfect man.

The powerful woman, who commanded criminals and assassins, while serving the literal queen of the Grimm, squealed like a young school girl. There was no denying her obsession with Jaune. But rather than regarding it as a bad thing, she *reveled* in her love.

Cinder wanted to run back to the cafeteria, pounce on him and declare her love for everyone to see!

But that bimbo was there too. Cinder's lovestruck expression morphed into a scowl when she thought of the blonde bitch.

It's only natural for someone as perfect, kind and wonderful as Jaune to attract potential lovers. I bet he's received dozens of love letters. But he's mine! MINE! Cinder thought to herself. Fire began to leak out of her eyes, which were literally aflame with anger. There were too many girls hanging around her knight. What if they wanted to sink their filthy claws in him? *No, I can't let that happen. Never! Jaune is mine, and mine alone. If any of those skanks even dares to make a romantic gesture, I'll burn their throats!*

Cinder took a deep breath. She needed to calm down. She hadn't spent all these years gathering power and knowledge just to waste it away by doing something reckless, like Mercury had done several minutes earlier. She was too smart for that. The half-maiden called upon the intelligence drilled into her by Salem, trying to formulate a plan.

She couldn't just kidnap Jaune - not like that. Cinder only felt abhorrence at the mention of hurting Jaune, as if her body's natural reaction was to expel such foul thoughts. He meant the world to her, and she'd be damned if he grew to hate her. Instead, a plan was needed. Yes, a way to get closer to her lovable knight. She would bump into him by 'accident', and talk to him first. Maybe even see if he remembered her.

If not, that was fine. Cinder didn't mind jogging his memory. And his friends could be assets too. By portraying herself as a person who got along with them, her wonderful knight would without a doubt see her in a favorable light. As long as they refrained from making advances on him, that is.

Cinder smiled; the lovestruck expression never leaving her.

"You will be mine, Jaune. I will have my shining knight in armor - whatever it takes."

Chapter 2

Had to plan out a bit more and change the outline, since I didn't expect so many people to be interested in this concept. It was originally meant to be a rather short one. Not sure if you all like how I write, or if you're just simping for a yandere Cinder. Oh well!

Before coming to Beacon, Lionheart had supplied them with extensive knowledge on its staff. The coward of a man had written down everything, from the most common knowledge to even the smallest detail. Nothing went unchecked. Fear was a powerful motivator on its own, but when Lionheart was faced with only a veiled threat, the Faunus couldn't bend over backwards faster than Tyrian stabbing someone. Frankly, it was a miracle his spine had snapped yet - if he had one.

But the traitorous headmaster had his uses. He'd given Cinder many useful tips about the teachers that worked at Beacon academy. These people were some of the most accomplished hunters and huntresses, handing down their wisdom and knowledge to the next generation of Grimm slayers. Plenty of which who worked directly underneath Ozpin, and knew of the man's secret war with the embodiment of evil.

Glynda Goodwitch, for example. Of all teachers and other staff members, she was by far the most dangerous. She possessed an almost ridiculously strong semblance, and had the accumulated experience of a veteran huntress. Additionally, the woman's strict demeanor and position as deputy headmistress told volumes of her professionalism. But the fact that she was a confirmed member of Ozpin's little group was far more important.

Cinder vividly remembered the brief clash with her, during one of Roman's botched robberies. The deputy headmistress had easily

countered most of her attacks. While she was quite sure she could take Goodwitch in an actual fight, rather than simply hurling projectiles and fire at each other, the outcome would be in Cinder's favor. Still, Goodwitch was dangerous.

Professor Peter Port, resident sleep-inducing storyteller, who sported a mustache that rivalled Watts? Not so much.

"So there I was; all alone, outnumbered by the pack of winged Beowolves, with only a few sticks and a single rock. They were ready to pounce, waiting for me to make a single mistake that would cost me my life. But I wasn't planning on becoming Grimm food, you see. Ho ho, on the contrary! These foul beasts soon learned that Peter Port can kill with what nature gives to him. For the rock is as mighty as the sword, and one hell of a useful tool!"

The man was droning on about yet another tale of his youth - most likely fabricated - while his students either pretended to listen, or didn't even put in the effort to hide their disinterest. Some were outright sleeping, for heaven's sake. Yet the old hunter did nothing to reprimand them. He was probably too invested into his own delusions to notice. Still, when Lionheart had warned them of the man's boisterous attitude and boring classes, Cinder had not expected... whatever this was.

She liked to think she'd developed a good amount of patience over the years. Between Tyrian's mad ramblings about his goddess, and Watts' continues prattle of his so-called 'superior' intellect, she was patient enough to deal with even the most difficult people. Take Roman for example; vain, dramatic, always looking for excuses, and annoying to listen to. Cinder could work together with the master thief, as long as he didn't overstep his boundaries. She *allowed* him to complain, if only to keep him complacent.

Port's obviously longwinded, boring storytelling was something she had no patience for, however.

The classroom was filled with the man's loud, obnoxious voice. He was so damn loud, in fact, that the underlying chatter between his students was muffled. They whispered among each other, trying to keep themselves entertained. Emerald and Mercury were bickering as usual. Quietly though. She'd give them that. And considering how no one could survive Port's lesson unscathed, she was inclined to forgive them for throwing jabs at each other. It'd be far more strange if they didn't do something to pass the time.

As for Cinder, she was conflicted. On one hand, she wanted this farce to be over with as soon as possible, so that she could have a chat with Jaune in private. On the other hand though, the longer Port's tale lasted, the longer she was able to gaze adoringly at the wonderful man seated several chairs away in the auditorium.

She sighed longingly, resting her head in one hand, as she kept her eyes locked on his back. Cinder hadn't paid even the slightest bit of attention to the front of the class so far. Her mind droned out all stimulus of her surroundings, and kept its focus on Jaune. The rational side of her head often warned her in time to avert her gaze, as to not be too obvious. She hated that. Looking away from his splendor felt like committing a sin.

He's just too perfect. Everyone else in this room seems so dull in comparison. Cinder thought, feeling very peaceful just from staring at her beloved. It was official; Jaune's presence was soothing in a way she couldn't comprehend. Much like her memories of him often were. *I could watch him all day. Mhm, maybe I should make a recording, to help me fall asleep at night. I want my darling to be the last thing I see before meeting him again in my dreams.*

A recording of his voice would be nice too. However, that was out of the question, seeing as that tub of lard in the front was being too noisy. Cinder clicked her tongue in genuine annoyance; something needed to be done about professor Port, if he was going to disturb her precious moments like this.

At her side, Emerald stiffened. Mercury followed suit out of reflex. The two of them gave her nervous glances, which she pointedly ignored in favor of watching her knight.

"Ma'am?"

"What is it, Emerald?" She glared at the girl out of the corner of her eye.

Emerald swallowed nervously. "It's just... You've been looking a lot at that blonde guy on Nikos' team."

"And your point is?"

"What Emerald is trying to ask," Mercury offered bravely, or foolishly depending on one's point of view, "Is why you're paying so much attention to the guy?"

They were curious. Cinder knew this would happen at one point. As troublesome as they were, neither Mercury nor Emerald were ignorant. One had been raised as an assassin, while the other had survived as a street rat. That meant both had picked up keen observational skills - another reason for recruiting them. But right now, they didn't need to know everything.

"Because he's their team leader. The more we know about team JNPR, the better." She wasn't afraid of other students listening in on them. They'd just misinterpret her words as those coming from a rival school team, which wanted a shot at beating the Invincible Girl of Mistral. "And a good place to start is its leader. After all, he develops their strategies and oversees team cohesion."

A lie. Cinder couldn't care less about team JNPR right now. The explanation she gave them was simply to avoid suspicion, seeing as she didn't want her underlings to be aware of the love she held for Jaune just yet. Luckily, they didn't question her - as they should. Emerald and Mercury simply accepted her reasoning as it was. Questioning her motives was regularly discouraged.

"Makes sense."

"He has to be good, right?" Emerald asked. "I mean, if he's team leader instead of Nikos. There were a lot of people in Haven that were upset with her current position. Then again, they were also upset she was at Beacon, rather than Mistral's academy."

"Only because of their national pride. Pyrrha Nikos comes from an influential family, and has been their idol for a long time now." She explained to them. Neither knew enough about Mistralian culture, but Cinder did.

Mercury huffed. "Is she really that good? Winning a few championships and appearing on some cereal box doesn't make you *that* important."

"On the contrary. Mistral is very proud of her accomplishments. Some of those contests you mentioned just now were international. They cheer and boast of her victories, because they can claim Mistral has beaten the other kingdoms - mighty Atlas included. For years, they have idolized Nikos, giving her the title of Invincible Girl; just to inflate their egos. Now, you can imagine the outrage when Mistral's rising huntress star decided to study at a foreign academy, instead of their own. Especially when she is finally allowed to compete in the Vytal tournament."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess that explains their attitudes."

"Of course it does." Emerald rolled her eyes in annoyance. "Cinder knows this stuff better than anyone."

As did plenty of critics. But Cinder wasn't going to comment. If explaining such a trifling matter made her seem so impressive, then she wasn't going to dispute her apparent brilliance.

More importantly, it was essential to know this due to Nikos being Jaune's partner. Oh, and she was also a maiden candidate. But that wasn't exactly a priority, now was it? Cinder was far more interested

in the... *relationship* that the two shared. And it had better be purely professional, or else.

As she looked at team JNPR, it was hard to say. Cinder believed herself to be an expert at reading people. You'd be surprised by how easy it was, as long as you looked for the right signals. Humans weren't always aware of the nonverbal signs they put on display. It was a subconscious thing, like looking away out of reflex when telling a lie.

Jaune's teammates weren't as obvious though. The second male member of the group was incredibly stoic, moving and speaking only when necessary. Even his facial expressions were limited. A stark contrast to the girl sat at his side; the orange one. To say that this girl was the exact opposite of him would be an understatement. She couldn't stop talking, and did so at a volume that almost eclipsed Port. The girl was a possible rival, even though she seemed to have eyes for the monk. Cinder wasn't going to take any risks without knowing more; for now, the girl was on her list.

As for Nikos, she'd need to observe the red-haired champion more closely.

"Still, do you really think the guy's that impressive?" Mercury spoke up, lounging back in his seat. One metallic limb rested on the table, showing just how little he cared for class rules. "He doesn't seem tough at all. Bit on the scrawny side, even. If I had to bet on who would win, between him and Nikos, I'd put my money on-"

Emerald hissed, gaze frightened. "Mercury!"

The assassin-trained teen snapped his mouth shut. With each word coming out of him, Cinder grew angrier and angrier. It wasn't an explosive anger, which would be followed by shouting and violence. No, it was cold and dangerous; almost manifesting itself as an oppressive aura, aimed at Mercury, but thick enough to be felt by those around her. It hung in the air like a miasma. Several students

behind them were suddenly quite occupied with Port's lesson, or hiding behind the books they held upside down.

"That's enough out of you, Mercury." Cinder spoke calmly, but with an underlying tone that threatened retribution. Her head was tilted forward, lustrous hair clouding her features. However, the blazing eye glaring sideways was more than visible. Enough for him to shrink in his seat. "I don't want to hear such comments again. Am I clear?"

Mercury nodded rapidly. His skin was pale, and a bead of sweat formed on his temple. Emerald didn't fare much better.

The sheer audacity of badmouthing Jaune... If she didn't have any use for him, and had it been easy to dispose of the body, she would have taught Mercury a lifelong lesson he'd never forget. Certainly not when his life *ended* during the process. To speak badly about her beloved was a heinous crime, and Cinder did not have much patience for those who committed it. In fact, Mercury was fortunate he hadn't said much.

Cinder took a deep breath, relaxing slightly now that the flow of words had stopped. She needed to keep her anger in check. These two were vital to her infiltration attempt, and would play a big role in events that were yet to come. She returned to her previous activity; gazing lovingly at her knight. His laidback posture inspired peace within her, draining whatever tension she might have felt. How could one man make her feel so peaceful without even doing anything?

"And then I faced the biggest challenge of all; choosing between the reward and the rock. For how could I throw away that which had saved my life, fighting against the darkness that plagues all of Remnant!"

But for now, less listening to Port, and more Jaune-watching.

Finding Jaune all alone was more difficult than expected, Cinder realized. Quite hard indeed.

It was almost as if he never went anywhere without his teammates. She could understand wanting to sit with them for classes, but was he really that attached to his friends, wanting to hang around them constantly? Cinder didn't understand this behavior. She couldn't stand being around her companions all the time. The bickering between Mercury and Emerald would drive her mad. So would Roman's constant blabbering, and Neo's snarky attitude. And Tyrian's behavior-

Maybe it was the company she surrounded herself with. Come to think of it, the people she kept in touch with were only tools to advance her own goals. That is how it's always been. Cinder considered Jaune to be the only person she would willingly associate herself with, and truly care for. Everyone else could be eaten by Grimm for all she cared. He was the only person on this forsaken planet who mattered. His company was all she needed; his love; his attention.

Still, Cinder had to accept that he liked his friends. The blonde Adonis was almost glued to his team, though luckily only in a purely platonic manner - so far.

Take the orange-haired girl for example. From what little Cinder had seen, through careful observations throughout the day, the girl was affectionate towards everyone. Or maybe outgoing was a better word. Regardless, this particular person had an incredibly bombastic personality. She hugged and touched without having a sense of personal space. If she didn't do it to everyone, Cinder might have considered her a primary threat. But no; it was the opposite.

The girl dragged her team along, sparking conversations left and right. They looked quite close actually. From what Cinder had heard, teams did not always get along perfectly - especially first-years. Such bonds needed time to develop.

That was not the case with team JNPR, unfortunately. Cinder strode through Beacon's hallways with purpose. Today had been nothing but reconnaissance so far, and while she was not able to isolate Jaune just yet, she was making progress. Every bit of info counted. Speaking of which, she would need to see if their timetables matched those of Beacon students.

While the academy obviously offered classes to all exchange students, not all of them had the same lessons. That'd be silly. Every huntsmen academy had its own curriculum, which was created by its headmaster and senior teachers. Sure, a few subjects were pretty much universal, but that didn't necessarily mean they were given in the same way or detail. You couldn't expect a student from Vacuo to follow the same survival lesson an Atlesian student had to, when they'd seen said lesson in the first semester.

Therefore the school's staff, led by deputy Goodwitch, had carefully made lesson plans for all exchange students. Many of which overlapped with the Beacon student body, yet some catered to their own curriculums. This meant that Cinder would not be in each class Jaune had. A pity. School life became incredibly boring when you couldn't worship your beloved with your eyes.

"We'll need to get a copy of the first years' timetables." Cinder explained. She received a hum of acknowledgement from Emerald. "See if you can acquire it from some student. If needed, you can sneak into the teachers' lounge, but make sure they can't see you. Our cover comes first."

"Of course. My semblance will render me completely invisible to them."

Hmm, true. Emerald's semblance was very useful. Recruiting her had been a wise choice; both for the mission, and Cinder's true goal. Illusionary semblances were hard to get by, and certainly one as powerful as the mint-haired girl's. Breaking out of her illusions was not only extremely difficult, but almost impossible. As long as she kept her focus, Emerald could deceive several people at the same

time despite the heavy strain it put on her. And Cinder had made sure to give plenty of infiltration advice.

"I know. You've become quite skilled at using it." She said, with a hint of appreciation. "Keep up the good effort."

Emerald beamed at the praise. "Yes! I-I-I mean... I'll do my best, Cinder."

"While Mercury is establishing an information network of his own, we'll keep an eye on our targets. I'm still convinced Ozpin has a plan for them."

As much of a sociopath as he was, Mercury was surprisingly good at interacting with others. No doubt because of his father. Assassins didn't just blend in the shadows, or kill their targets from afar and be done with it - there was more to it. Killing someone required preparation. Information too; things like habits, routines, abilities and whatnot. But in order to get this intel, you needed to be able to immerse yourself in the public; get them to spill the beans, so to speak.

And if Mercury's new contacts would supply them with necessary information for future operations, then that was time well invested.

"Why do you think so?" Emerald asked out of curiosity.

"It's simple. Well, at least when you look at the signs. Take Ruby Rose as an example. Not only did she walk away from fighting Roman - out in the open streets where she could have hurt someone by accident - without any repercussions. The girl was also allowed to enter Beacon two years in advance." Cinder glanced at the corridor to their left; always on the lookout. One couldn't be too careful. "That is unheard of. Prodigy or not, you shouldn't expect a girl barely old enough to drink to fight Grimm like her peers."

"Because it's frowned upon by society, right? They don't believe the situation is dire enough to send in little girls to fight monsters."

Emerald said.

"Among others. This isn't a prep school like Signal academy - people can *die* . It isn't unheard of for students to die during initiation, even if there are teachers on standby. But it would be both bad and unheard of if you expected a fifteen year old to participate."

And that was without going into detail about the initiation itself. Seriously, what was wrong with these people? Launching fresh students into the air from a cliff, while telling them to think of a landing strategy? Madness. Pure, utter madness! Had they not considered that her poor Jaune might have died?! Cinder couldn't care less about the other teens; their broken bodies meant nothing. But the image of her beloved, bloody and broken, while being stuck in some tree...

Cinder had to rein in her mounting fury before it exploded.

"Huh. That is kind of messed up." Emerald muttered to herself, completely unaware of her boss' inner thoughts. She frowned in confusion. "When you put it like that, it *does* look suspicious why that Rose girl was allowed to enter Beacon early."

"Precisely. Defeating a bunch of thugs that don't even have their aura unlocked is hardly noteworthy enough. Many - if not all - students in the advanced classes of any prep combat school could perform such an act. But Ozpin chose her, and then put her on a team filled with strong or influential huntresses-in-training."

Her companion gave her a questioning look. "Wait, didn't they have this silly rule of having to partner up with the first person you make eye contact with? And when you retrieved a chess piece, you had to form a team with a duo that matched yours."

"Seems rather random, no? It's not that difficult to understand though. What if I told you the platforms were rigged, so that certain students would land in a close vicinity to each other?" Cinder could see the gears turning inside Emerald's head. For someone who had

received minimal education, the girl was smart. "Not to mention it's easy to prearrange the chess pieces. Meanwhile, the students are none the wiser; they think their teams were formed by pure chance, while in reality, someone nudged them into the right direction."

"That's... a bit creepy to be honest."

But practical. Emerald simply didn't understand the sheer size of the game Ozpin played; what was at stake. In a fight against an immortal woman, who commanded Grimm and human agents alike, you needed all the assets you could get your hands on. Team RWBY wasn't even aware of how their headmaster was molding them to be his next chess pieces.

Cinder found the analogy a bit humorous.

But no smile found its way to her perfect face. Not when she contemplated on how Jaune was also being manipulated. That bastard in the tower knowingly sent wonderful people like him into battle, knowing there was no way of winning against Salem. Just like a pig to the slaughter. By the time she was done here, Ozpin would be on his way to a next reincarnation. And then she'd find him again, just to watch him suffer. He would pay for putting her Jaune in harm's way.

"Nevertheless," She spoke up after a moment of silence. "I need you to infiltrate team RWBY. Befriend them in one way or another. Not only are they important to Ozpin, but they're also good friends with team JNPR."

"Killing two birds with one stone. I understand, ma'am."

They continued their walk to the classroom. Apparently their next lesson would be professor Goodwitch's combat class, which Cinder obviously did not need. She was plenty dangerous herself. Cinder's combat experience was far more advanced than these children. It was a given, seeing as they hadn't been exposed to life and death situations as she had been. What was fighting a small pack of

Beowolves compared to being thrown into the Grimmlands by its ruler, where you had to constantly fight for your own survival?

Salem's training had been nothing short of cruel, hard and life-threatening. But she survived. Cinder had slain Ursai, skewered Deathstalkers and burned whatever other creatures had attempted to eviscerate her. Each encounter had made her stronger. She had thought of Jaune during every day that she spent in that hellscape. The pure, sheer love she had for that boy was what kept her going.

And now she would be rewarded. Cinder was going to stand at his side, either as an equal or a servant, once her chains to Salem were finally broken. He was the only one she'd ever serve again.

They arrived early; only a few students were inside the auditorium, all dressed in their combat outfits. Unlike the other classes, diversity between academies was encouraged in Goodwitch's class. It was a good opportunity for students to learn from each other. Of course, that's what the teachers had in their minds. The students themselves simply wanted to see what the competition had in store, while trying to limit showing off too much. That's what the smart ones did, at least. If you wanted to have a shot at winning the tournament, you didn't just display all of your tactics and skills for all to see. Only arrogant idiots did that.

Cinder sat down in a secluded section. Emerald quickly joined her, and kept a seat for Mercury, who arrived ten minutes later. She gave him only a moment of attention. Then she returned to scanning the audience for Jaune, hoping to see him again. Students from all academies were starting to fill the seats. Unsurprisingly, most kept to their own groups. While the Vytal tournament was supposedly all about cooperation, you didn't see many students mingling with those of other academies.

Which was fairly normal. Who wanted to sit with total strangers, when you could talk in hushed whispers with friends you already knew?

Her interest in them - as small as it already was - vanished completely when Cinder spotted Jaune. He walked into the auditorium dressed in jeans, a black hoodie and bits of armor. On his waist hung an ordinary-looking sword. Curious. Was that the only weapon he fought with? She shifted her gaze, scanning his friends in order to see what they fought with. Judging by the far more modern designs, she assumed they *did* use mechashift weaponry as opposed to her beloved.

Well, Cinder was certain that Jaune knew what he was doing. And even if he didn't, she'd make sure to point him in the right direction. No way she would allow her future husband to put his life in danger without proper training. Then again, he wouldn't need to fight at all, if it were up to her. She'd kill his enemies long before they could so much as set foot in a ten meter radius of him.

"Welcome, everyone. Sit down please." Goodwitch announced as she walked onto the stage down below. The bespectacled woman knew how to radiate authority, Cinder would give her that much. "As usual, we will start off with several sparring matches. Those who were unable to come to the front last week will be called on today. If there's still time left, I'll call on students from the other academies. Remember that we are here to learn from each other. Even if it will only be two individuals fighting, that doesn't mean you can't observe and analyze the fight. Any mistakes made here are meant to be learned from. Additionally, any feedback I give to them can be valuable to you as well; so keep that in mind."

And with that, the lesson officially started.

Cinder sat casually as the students fought against each other, albeit with the refined dignity she'd learned from the Atlesian elite that visited the hotel, back when she used to be a slave to the madam. If only the hag could see her now. She'd become so much more without that witch. The villainess decided to watch the spars, while also keeping an eye on the familiar blonde knight.

However, what she saw was subpar at best. Cinder easily picked out the many flaws of multiple students, and smirked haughtily with a sense of superiority. They were still children after all. Some fought sloppily, thinking their stances were good enough in close combat. Yet she could make them lose their balance with the right kick of shove. Then there were those who relied on brute power, but lacked the finesse and agility to catch her. Cinder almost scoffed at the display; none were potential threats.

After several fights, however, the deputy called upon the blonde *bitch* from team RWBY. The one who had talked so leisurely to Jaune. Suddenly she was quite invested in this fight. Hopefully the bimbo would get trashed, or knocked out cold.

Sadly not. Yang - as Mercury had learned of the brawler from his new contacts - was far more durable and skilled than expected. She managed to keep up with her opponent; some fellow with two knives. Whoever had taught close quarters combat to this girl, he or she knew their stuff. Even Cinder couldn't spot any visible blind spots. And while her defense was impressive, Yang's offensive capabilities were definitely her strongest suit. Each blow dealt considerable damage to her foe.

"Is it just me, or is every blow she lands stronger than the previous one?" Mercury wondered out loud.

"I think it has to do with receiving damage." Emerald pointed out. The girl's red-tinted eyes observed the fight closely; a technique taught to her by Cinder. "Whenever that guy hits her, she deals more damage. Has to be a semblance. I mean, just look at how her hair is glowing."

"There's conditioner for that, Em. No need to be jealous of strangers."

Emerald's cheeks darkened. "Not that, dumbass! Her hair is *literally* glowing."

"Children, children," Cinder interjected before another argument could start, "Play nice with each other. But Emerald is right; the girl seems to have a semblance that turns damage into extra power. It would explain how they managed to take down our good friend from Vale."

Also known as Roman Torchwick, of course.

It was obvious from the start who would win though. Xiao-Long was the more experienced fighter, and had a semblance that nullified her opponent's efforts. That being said, the boy did not go down without a fight. He fought hard and was quick. Sometimes he halted Yang's advance, but never quite delivered a decisive blow, or could change the course of this fight. Not to mention he was getting tired.

Yang slipped through his guard at one point, and punched him right in the face. The blow was strong enough to bring down his aura into the red. Cinder was disappointed to see the guy with the mohawk lose - only because the bitch won as a result.

"Mister Trush is unable to continue this fight. Victory goes to miss Xiao-Long." Goodwitch announced.

Mercury hummed. "Not bad. Looks like blondie knows how to fight."

"She seems to be one of the highest ranking first-years, indeed." She said in reluctant agreement.

Xiao-Long joined her team, boasting of how she'd won the spar. Cinder gritted her teeth when the bimbo turned to team JNPR, and received their congratulations too. Seeing that girl draw Jaune's attention made her want to kill someone. Preferably in a very violent manner. Meanwhile, her opponent passed several boys in armor and said a few words to them, before wandering off to the showers. Most likely his friends or team.

So, it would appear that team RWBY was more dangerous than expected. Cinder didn't doubt her own ability, but she couldn't say

the same for her allies. Even the most experienced fighters in the White Fang were no match for Xiao-Long, nor were the minions she'd 'recruited' in Vale's criminal underworld. Only Roman, Neo or Adam could put a halt to the brawler. And there was the rest of her team too.

"Will Cardin Winchester and Jaune Arc make their way to the stage, please."

What?!

Cinder's head snapped to team JNPR's position, only to see her beloved already moving reluctantly. Just like that, her mind muted the rest of the world once more. She only had eyes for Jaune. He looked so dashing in that armor, while carrying a sword and shield. Truly befitting of a righteous knight like him.

When the boy set foot inside the ring, she glanced for a split second at his competition. The other student was tall, broad and wore armor as well. Yet where Jaune wielded a sword, this burly teen used a large mace. Cinder was immediately pissed off by the arrogant smirk on his face. Who was he to think of himself as superior to Jaune?! That Winchester bastard had no right!

"Begin!" Goodwitch announced.

Jaune's opponent immediately rushed in, shouting loudly in an attempt of intimidation. How silly. It was a childish act fit for idiots. In response, Jaune took a stance and braced himself. Yet when the mace-wielding brute tried to swing at him, he dodged at the last second, giving him an opening. Excitement pooled in Cinder's stomach as she watched her idol slice at the boy's side. Above the ring, the green bar representing his aura decreased.

"Smart move." Emerald grunted.

It was! But what else should she expect from Jaune? Of course he was an amazing knight, and no doubt his abilities were superb as

well-

Jaune crashed into the ground after being struck by the large mace that his foe swung around. Cinder paused. Her eyes saw him fall in slow motion; hurt and in pain. He got up again, but the bully maintained his initiative and kept attacking faster than Jaune could recover.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

She could hear her own heartbeat inside her head as her rage increased. This wasn't like the jealous mood from when she saw Jaune's female friends hang out with him. It didn't even come close to when Mercury had unknowingly insulted her beloved.

The fight lasted a minute longer, before Jaune was forced to concede. His aura was in the red whereas his foe's was at 65 percent. Cinder was faintly aware of Goodwitch calling an end to the match; how her underlings discussed with each other. Murmurs erupted from the audience. But it was all white noise to her.

When she looked at Jaune, battered and humiliated as he slumped towards the locker room, both of her hands heated up considerably. As a result, the edge of her seat began to darken and smolder. The boy who had fought her knight boasted of his victory. Much like Xiao-Long, but with mocking laughter aimed at Jaune. Never before had she desired to kill someone as much as she did now. Her blood was boiling, and thoughts of vengeance filled her mind.

It would be so easy. Simply summon a pillar of fire underneath his feet, shoot arrows of dark glass, or driving a sword straight through his insignificant heart. However, that would be too merciful - he needed to *suffer* .

But she refrained from doing so. It would not only blow her cover, but also neutralize any chances she had of getting closer to Jaune.

Cinder stood up, ignoring Emerald's confused inquiry as to where she was going. Instead, she left them behind. There was no time to be wasted here.

Her knight needed her.

So as you might see, this chapter doesn't really contain much. Rather it's to set the scene a bit further than only the prologue. Plus, I've learned that it's best not to rush these kind of things. Instant gratification is bad and all that. Also didn't want to stretch out the fights, since they don't matter that much.

Chapter 3

To say that Jaune felt bad would be an understatement. Right now, he felt terrible. If he got the opportunity to crawl under a rock and stay there, he'd take it; no hesitation.

Now, that fight wasn't his worst, to be fair. He'd been an absolute mess during the first semester. The fact that he managed to survive this long was an accomplishment in itself. He also got in a few good hits on Cardin. At least, compared to how the taller teen had always tossed him around like a ragdoll before. Back then he'd been hopeless, and was at the lowest ranking of professor Goodwitch's scoreboard.

It was because of Pyrrha and his team that he got to this level, to be honest. Jaune realized that without his partner, he wouldn't have improved so drastically in such a short time; benefits of her being a champion. Even if he'd never realized she was *that* famous. Pyrrha never really acted like it anyway. Always so polite and humble, despite being the strongest student in their year by far. Stronger than a large number of upper years too.

Which kind of put quite a bit of pressure on him. Jaune knew he shouldn't blame Pyrrha for this, but being the partner of such an accomplished huntress-in-training was frightening sometimes. People expected the best from her. Meanwhile, he was just a guy who'd cheated his way into Beacon, with no previous training whatsoever. And while he was incredibly thankful for Pyrrha's help - she was a blessing - the gap between them was far too big to fill. So all he could do was train hard, do his best and hope that he didn't disappoint her.

Even if that spar from earlier was the complete opposite of that.

Jaune sighed as he sat down on a bench, leaving Crocea Mors next to him. His shoulders were hunched forward; a sign of defeat.

Because that's how he honestly felt - outright defeated.

The fight had started off pretty well, despite what happened afterwards. Pyrrha and him had worked on his stance during combat training, and she'd explained what to do when facing an opponent who would charge him. By waiting and anticipating his target's trajectory, he could dodge and sneak into the enemy's guard. His foe would be unable to retaliate due to their own momentum.

Apparently it was a good tactic for fighting Ursai, but worked pretty good with Cardin too. Scoring first blood was an exhilarating experience.

Unfortunately, that was all that worked out for him. Jaune knew what went wrong; he'd been too busy overthinking his moves, when he should have put some distance between himself and Cardin's onslaught. As team leader, he was praised for his quick thinking and tactics, but those only applied when he had teammates surrounding him. His mind wasn't used to multitasking in a one-on-one fight.

"I really messed up..." Jaune sighed. He exhaled loudly; the expelled air brushing against messy, blonde strands of hair above his forehead.

He leaned back, placing both of his hands on the wide bench for support, and stared aimlessly at the ceiling. Jaune didn't really feel like getting up. After such a humiliating defeat, he felt no rush to make himself presentable so he could join the others. Well, maybe because of another reason too.

Jaune liked his friends. He really did! Team JNPR was a tight-knit group that had little to no problems internally, which was something he'd always longed for. It was something Ansel never provided. He might have had some friends there, but none ever got as close as Pyrrha, Ren and Nora - *especially* Nora. They were people he could depend on, and who were fun to hang around with.

Same thing with their sister team RWBY. Ruby was his first best friend after all. They regularly played videogames together, which was only one of many hobbies they shared. And while he only interacted with the other girls because of her, Jaune felt confident to say they were friends. Because when you have a really intense food fight in good fun, and almost wreck an entire cafeteria together, you could call each other friends. Right?

Anyway, Jaune was happy with his friends. However, they weren't exactly good company after a loss like that. Perhaps it was a bit selfish or arrogant to think like this, but Jaune didn't want to hear their patronizing words. That's what they gave him each time he lost.

Nora would laugh his defeat away, saying something silly like how he must have gotten dust in his eyes. Pyrrha would praise him for doing his best, even when that clearly wasn't enough to win once. Ruby would act similarly like his partner, and offer some form of excuse. Then there was Yang; the same as her little sister, but more laidback. She probably acted that way because of Ruby.

Honestly, he was happy with how the others acted. Neither Weiss, Blake or Ren offered excuses. The Schnee heiress was always quick to point out what had gone wrong, as if realizing that she'd need to be the counterweight to her friends' soft approach. If only she could do it without sounding so harsh all the time. He appreciated her feedback, but Weiss knew how to break him down like none other.

So yeah; while he loved his friends dearly, he'd rather just sit here a bit longer.

Jaune hummed softly, remembering a silly tune from a kids cartoon he used to watch when he was little. *They're probably wondering where I am right now. Well, I'm sure Weiss or Yang will say I can take care of myself. There aren't any lessons left today, so they'll be heading back to the dorms. As long as I don't take too long and join them before five o'clock, it'll be fine.*

Missing dinner would raise too many eyebrows. It was a team tradition to eat together, even if they'd been a team for less than a year. Nora was the one who had suggested it - unsurprisingly. Something about wanting to spend as much time as she could with her new family. He wouldn't say they were a family just yet, but Jaune did consider her a very good friend. The same went for Pyrrha and Ren. Maybe he could see them as family in a year or two, if they kept this up.

Jaune almost jumped as the door to the locker room suddenly swiveled open with an audible creak. Not wanting to be caught in such a depressive manner, he sat up straight and prepared himself to stand.

Only for his jaw to go slack as a girl - a rather very, *very* attractive one - sauntered into the room.

Despite spending so much time with what would be considered beautiful girls, Jaune couldn't help but be in awe of this stranger. She was a different kind of beauty all together. His not-so-subtle crush on Weiss was because of how pretty she was, like a princess out of a fairy tale, with doll-like features such as the white hair and porcelain looks. Yang was simply a bombshell; developed, fiery hair and personality, and with an attitude that stood out. Her sister was cute, and certainly as attractive as the others.

But he didn't really think of Ruby like that. She was his first best friend, and he didn't see her as a romantic partner. But rather as the person he could comic books together with; or play videogames and tell secrets to each other.

Blake and Pyrrha were also beautiful in their own rights. The dark-haired member of team RWBY was alluring, with a lower body to die for. Not even he could discount the 'bellabooty' rumors that ran rampant among the male students. Meanwhile, Pyrrha was like Yang, albeit more akin to Ruby in personality. Not to mention athletic. More than your usual huntress. Of course, she was his partner and far out of his league, so he didn't bother thinking of her romantically.

Someone as beautiful and accomplished as Pyrrha having an interest in him. Pff, right!

This unannounced visitor was different though. From her tall height to her stacked curves, she looked akin to a model. The kind that had tens of thousands - if not a million - fans across the globe that worshiped her. Jaune could see porcelain skin where her Haven uniform didn't cover, but she hardly required to show off skin to make his heart race. The girl's tights-covered legs were long and slender, yet he did not doubt the thickness of her thighs, nor her fitness.

Long, dark hair as black as the night pooled over her back. Jaune's mouth felt a bit dry as he looked at her face. The same model looks with full lips, cute nose and eyes similar to Blake's, but far more intense. They reminded him of burning embers. Even the way she walked towards his bench, swaying her generous hips, somehow conveyed a sense of raw beauty. Those eyes looked familiar though...

All in all, Jaune gave her a ten out of ten. Tiny Jaunes ran rampant inside his head, flailing their hands around as alarms blared and an air siren announced impending-

"You must be Jaune, right?"

Oh, no... she's hot!

Attractive girls were his weakness! Well, one of many weaknesses, but still a big one nonetheless. Even her voice sounded silky for some reason.

It took a good three seconds before Jaune's brain caught up. "Wha-oh, yes! I mean, uh, that's me alright. The name's Jaune Arc; short, sweet, rolls off the tongue, ladies love it." He sputtered.

The air siren peaked its crescendo as his brain exploded out of pure embarrassment and shame.

Why did he go with that awful line drilled into his head by his mom?! Jaune blinked stupidly, wishing the ground could swallow him whole. He remained seated out of fear that she would stare at him as if he was some kind of creep. Oh, how lucky he was that he'd used that only on Ruby, and that she found it funny. Now he went ahead and made the same mistake with this gorgeous exchange student.

"Really now?" The girl giggled - actually *giggled* - at his silly introduction. She smiled in amusement, holding a hand in front of her mouth like a refined lady. "Do you introduce yourself like that to every girl you meet?"

"Not really no. They don't like it that much, actually." Jaune visibly deflated.

"Mhm, I think it's cute. And it does roll off the tongue; Jaune Arc. I like it."

Wait, what?

He looked up at the stranger, seeing no deception or mockery. She actually didn't mind that cheesy one-liner? Jaune considered himself very lucky in that moment. He had it on good authority, such as Yang, that his wordplay needed some hard work. And saying stupid stuff like that was definitely not a good way to befriend strangers.

"It does?" He averted his gaze, feeling a bit embarrassed. Both of his cheeks felt warm. "Well, thanks. I guess. You must be from Haven. Which is... kind of obvious since you're wearing the uniform, now that I think about it."

"My team is participating in the vyal tournament, yes. As will yours, I bet. You're in a team with Pyrrha Nikos after all." The pretty girl sat down next to him. Jaune felt nervous just by how close she was. "Speaking of which, I saw your fight just now. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I'm okay. It was just a little spar. Cardin is pretty good, so I don't mind losing as long as I learn something from it."

That made her frown. "Are you sure? That brute was unnecessarily rough with you."

"Don't worry. If you think that was rough, you should have seen him last semester. I was a lot worse back then, too. This fight was nothing compared to our earlier matches. Besides, I can take a few hits." Jaune forced himself to laugh, summoning false bravado.

While the bully did stop the blackmailing and public harassment, Cardin hadn't fully changed after the trip to Forever Fall. The guy had simply laid low for a while. He was already back to his old ways, albeit more subdued, and still got a kick out of beating the crap out of Jaune in the ring. It really sucked.

"Somehow, I don't doubt that. But I *do* think you're not being completely honest with me." She said not unfriendly. If anything, this girl was looking at him with concern for some reason. Naturally, his hormone-filled brain liked to insinuate she might want to get to know him better - as if. "But I won't force the issue. I understand you're not comfortable enough to discuss such things with strangers."

"N-no! It's not like that. Not at all." Jaune grimaced; he didn't want to upset her. His gaze drifted lower to meet the floor and his feet. "Cardin is... Well, he's not really a friend, but he isn't as bad as he used to be. I choose to ignore him, that's all. And it's my fault anyway for being so clumsy in that fight. I'm not really that great in fights."

He'd improved drastically. But not enough, however. The ravenette tilted her head to the side, curls of lustrous dark hair dangling in the air.

"What do you mean? From what I saw, you were holding up well against that brute. Making a few mistakes isn't the end of the world. It'd be strange if you didn't learn from your mistakes, especially in a mock battle organized by a teacher."

Jaune looked up, a spark of hope in his eyes. "You think so? To me, it looked bad - *felt* bad too. I'd be bruising if it wasn't for my aura."

"Well, I do." The mysterious girl's lips tugged upwards. She leaned in a bit closer, almost touching his shoulder with hers. "That opening move was splendid. You anticipated what your opponent was going to do, and used his momentum against him. If you'd capitalized a bit more, you would have been able to lower his aura considerably. And you evaded a lot of his attacks during the fight. Not everyone can be that quick on their feet; certainly while wearing armor."

"Ha, that was nothing special though. You should see my friends; they could kick Cardin's ass with ease. Or break his legs, in Nora's case."

She gave him a sympathetic look. "Don't sell yourself short. It wasn't them out there, fighting hard and smart. You should feel proud of the effort you put into your training."

Maybe, but Jaune had trouble believing it. No matter how much he trained and sparred with Pyrrha, he didn't seem to be improving all that much. At least not enough to his liking. Saying that he'd done a good job was easy, but the truth of the matter said something different altogether.

"But my first move was one that my partner taught me," He pointed out. "Which means it wasn't entirely because of my own efforts."

"That doesn't disprove my point. Even if she taught you that skill, *you* were the one who executed it flawlessly and trained hard to do so. A parent celebrates the moment their child rides their first bicycle, although they were the one who showed the child how to use it. It's what you do *with* that knowledge that counts. Being humble is a good trait. Not owning up to your own accomplishment, however, is self-destructive and doesn't help anyone." The words she spoke were confronting, but she did not say them unkindly. The mysterious girl looked at him earnestly, meeting his gaze with her own to show that she meant it. "I see a lot of potential in you, Jaune Arc."

That... Jaune swallowed to clear the invisible lump in his throat. Those words were what he needed to hear. Not a simple excuse or

that he'd manage to do better next time, but that he *wasn't* useless. Not like how he felt.

"Thanks. I guess I kind of needed to hear that." He offered her a weak smile.

The girl returned the gesture. Her smile was pretty, just like her. Jaune still couldn't understand why such a beautiful girl was talking to him. He wasn't going to complain though. However, there was something about this girl that felt vaguely familiar. As if he'd met her before, but the answer was on the tip of his tongue. From where had he seen her...

"I'm only saying what I believe. Besides, after what that boy put you through, I felt obliged to check up on you. Someone ought to have a little chat with him." She looked away for a bit, hiding her face. Not for long; she turned back and smiled. Jaune's heart skipped a beat. "How about I teach you some moves? My choice of weapons are swords as well. I dual wield mine, but that wouldn't stop me from showing a few tricks you could use."

"Really? You'd do that?"

"Of course. I don't mind helping you out. And if it cuts down Cardin's ego a bit, then I definitely won't say no." She added the last part with a small smirk.

Jaune grinned happily in response. He'd need to fit it in his schedule, since it was already packed with school activities, homework, friends and Pyrrha's own training regime. At this point, he would accept all the help he could get though. From a stranger too.

"Thanks! I really appreciate it."

The pretty student giggled, nodding. "My pleasure. In fact, I also wanted to talk to you about-"

"Jaune? Are you there?"

A familiar redhead made her way inside, scanning briefly before spotting her partner. Pyrrha let out a sigh of relief as she approached the bench. She was still dressed in her combat outfit, resembling an ancient Mistralian warrior of a city long destroyed. From a time before the current kingdoms were established apparently. Jaune had read about it during high school. Still, that meant Pyrrha hadn't gone back to the dorms yet with the others.

"Pyrrha? What are you doing here?" Jaune asked, confused.

"Well, class is done but you didn't come back yet, so I thought there might be something wrong. Sorry for interrupting." The champion of Mistral turned her attention the stranger at his side. "Hi, my name is Pyrrha Nikos. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Yes, I know who you are." The sudden shift in her tone of voice was a surprise. The compassion and empathy from earlier was gone; replaced by cold detachment. "It's nice to mee you too, but I'm afraid I'll have to leave now. My team will be waiting for me, if combat class is over. Please excuse me."

Jaune was too shocked to stop her as she left for the exit, faster than expected. All he could do was say a quick 'bye' before she was gone. Which left him alone with Pyrrha, as well as a bunch of questions. One of which stood out most of all; a big one.

Who was that girl? She didn't give me her name.

"Jaune? Are you alright?" Pyrrha shook him out of his thoughts, glancing at the door through which his mystery friend had escaped. "Do you know her?"

"I'm fine, Pyr. And honestly? Not at all. But I can't help but feel as if I've seen her before somewhere a long time ago."

To say that Cinder was angry would be an understa-

No, actually she was *furious* . About to burn down the entire academy furious. Never before had she felt such raw anger. Not at Tyrian's taunting, or Watt's insults. As much as she hated those bastards, they hadn't interrupted during her first reunion with Jaune.

It was frankly a miracle that she hadn't done that already. Or killed someone else, like a hapless bystander in the hallway. Her eyebrow twitched madly, and she could feel her body tensing in an attempt to restrain herself. Cinder knew that her temper could be volatile. It was one of the first things Salem had worked, molding her pupil into a refined manipulator. That image was difficult to maintain considering the current circumstances.

Pyrrha Nikos was an obstacle; it was official from now on.

The conversation had been going so well, as short as it was. Cinder wasn't mad that he hadn't recognized her immediately. He'd been so young back then. You couldn't expect a child to remember every person he'd met during his youth. Though she would have preferred he did, Cinder silently admitted. But that wasn't a problem. Pyrrha *fucking* Nikos was!

She'd been moments away from asking whether or not he remembered her, and then that skank dared to interrupt. Ugh! Cinder's blood boiled with rage at the fresh memory. The opportunity had been there. Just a few more minutes - that's all she'd needed. And now the moment was gone.

Cinder understood that she'd used underhanded tactics. Anyone with a functioning brain could see that Jaune didn't have much confidence in his abilities, leading to doubts about himself. She'd picked up on this out of pure instinct. According to Salem, there was much to be gained from spotting a person's weakness or something that bothered them, in order to manipulate them. Of course, misleading Jaune was the last thing she wanted to do. Sadly she had little choice in certain matters.

She doubted he would appreciate hearing that she'd killed innocent people. Or that her current mission was to destroy Beacon, lay waste to the Vytal Festival, and steal a comatose woman's magical powers. Not the best way to hook up with her knight to say the least. Best to keep him in the dark on those matters for now.

But the offer she'd made to him was genuine. Cinder refused to believe that he didn't have potential; someone as amazing as Jaune was destined for greatness, and simply needed some nurturing. She'd gladly take on that role. Teaching Jaune served multiple purposes anyway.

For starters, he needed as much protection as he could get. Cinder would rather die than allow him to get hurt, but she understood that her beloved knight would seek the thrill of adventure. She couldn't defend him all the time. That was simply impossible, unless she took away his freedom - also unacceptable. That would at best sadden him, and at worst drive him mad.

But Cinder would feel more at ease if he received extra training from her. There were plenty of tricks and skills she could teach.

Secondly, this was a good way for them to get to know each other better. Not that she needed to know more about him in order to love Jaune even more than she already did. Cinder scoffed. It was absurd to consider she loved him less than what was possible; she'd *die* for this boy if necessary.

Still, learning more about his hobbies didn't hurt either. And he had to fall in love with her too. So the training equaled extra time to spend with each other, which further translated into increased chances of Jaune falling for her. It was the definition of a win-win situation. She would earn his love, and Jaune would learn to better defend himself.

Cinder halted next to a vending machine. Retrieving some change from her pocket, she bought a bottle of water. Cooler heads would prevail now. She'd prefer tea to calm down, but water would do the

trick just fine. And it made her think of other things than just driving a spear of black glass through Nikos' head.

This was progress. No matter how you looked at it, this conversation proved that she could connect with the handsome teen. Worming her way into his heart might go better than expected. Jaune was a bit shy, but didn't close himself off to others. Besides, his awkward gestures and demeanor was just too adorable! Like a cute golden puppy.

Gods, he was so wonderful! Now that she'd calmed down, Cinder was overwhelmed by intense feelings of adoration and love for the knight. If she'd stepped any closer, she would have been able to reach out and touch him-

Cinder blinked as a drop of water dribbled down her chin. Oh. She was being a bit too enthusiastic, it seemed.

"Haha, did you see how Arc fell flat on his ass?"

"Like a bag of potatoes? Yeah, we noticed."

Several voices came from around the corner, drawing the ravenette's attention. And judging by the subject, they were discussing Jaune's fight in a manner that she most certainly did *not* appreciate. Not in the slightest.

She peeked into the hallway, stealthily observing the small group of male students that were being so obnoxiously loud. Cinder immediately recognized as team CRDL, led by none other than a dead man. Said bully was the loudest out of the four, and boasted of his victory as if he'd accomplished something worthwhile. The four students were huddled together.

"That should teach Jaune some manners. Always acting so cocky. I swear, ever since that school trip, he's been acting as if he actually deserves to be here." Cardin said.

The mohawk insect grunted his agreement. "Only because he's got that crazy powerful partner of his. Nikos is like a guard dog or something. Always sticking close to Jaune, as if she can't be separated from him."

"Well, she can't defend him when he's out there in the ring. Perfect opportunity to kick his ass, I say."

"Which is exactly what we'll keep doing from now. If any of us get picked to fight that geek, we'll put him in his place." Cardin declared. The rest of the all-male team were in accord, laughing alongside their leader. Each and every one of them unaware of the literal murderer around the corner. "Anyway, you guys go on ahead. Save me a seat. I'm going to take a quick leak first."

"Sure thing, boss."

Cinder smiled sadistically as Cardin walked off to find the nearest toilets. She couldn't do anything about Pyrrha Nikos yet, but Jaune's bully was an entirely different story. Maybe getting revenge for the earlier match would be cathartic enough to soothe her rage.

Retrieving her scroll, she dialed her most loyal subordinate's number. "Emerald. Meet me at the corner between corridor D5 and D4. I have a small task for you."

Whistling confidently, Cardin exited the bathroom stall as he made his way over to the sink. He was feeling great after trashing Jaune-boy for the umpteenth time. Served that dork right. He couldn't touch the guy directly without Nikos finding out, and having Mistral's prodigy on his back was something he did not want. Not to mention that crazy Nora chick would find out as well. The threats she made about breaking legs? Pretty convincing, if you asked him.

And then there was team RWBY. They'd come to their friend's rescue, too. Yang Xia-Long was the second biggest threat in their year, and probably the only one who could last longer than anyone

else against Nikos. Plus, she threw a nasty right hook, as Dove could attest to.

How the hell did Jaune score good points with such bombshells anyway?

This is why the guy deserved to get his butt kicked from time to time. Cardin chuckled at the memory of Jaune lying on the floor, aura in the red and defeated. Combat class was fun when he could beat up people he disliked. It was the perfect moment to blow off steam, and relax by unleashing pent-up frustration. Too bad professor Goodwitch ended the fight so soon.

But hey, Cardin would take any chance he got at lashing out against those stuck-up assholes. Teams RWBY and JNPR acted so high and mighty all of the time, getting away with stuff that others wouldn't be able to without being severely punished. Trashing an entire cafeteria? Literally breaking support pillars, vending machines and launching someone *through* the roof?

If that wasn't favoritism, then Cardin didn't know what was. The headmaster was insane for allowing stuff like that.

It's why he hadn't exposed Jaune's fake entry into Beacon academy. Well, that and other reasons. Cardin didn't even have concrete proof that Jaune had falsified his documents. If those same papers got him entered into the school, then why would the teachers believe his word against Jaune's? Actually, had Jaune thought of that before Forever Fall, then he would have been able to call Cardin's bluff. Not that he'd admit to being outplayed, of course.

It just wasn't worth it in the end. Earning himself new enemies, or simply provoking the sister teams would result in more trouble than it was worth it. Cardin decided that it was better to just trash Jaune in a sparring match, rather than going after the guy in public.

The tall teen kept whistling as he washed his hands, using the soap dispenser to clean them. He was civilized, unlike those faunus. They

probably didn't even know what soap was; filthy animals. He chuckled at his little inside joke. The Winchester family hated their kind, and for good reason.

His father always said that faunus had no business becoming huntsmen. They were better off on their stupid, little island where they'd been dumped on after the war. Animals didn't belong in a prestigious school like Beacon.

Halfway through cleaning his hands, however, Cardin frowned as a patch of red appeared on his palms.

The fuck...

Cardin rubbed them together, trying to get rid of the sudden color. Why were his hands suddenly covered in... Wait, was that blood?!

He looked on horror as the water coming out of the hose turned into a torrent of blood. The crimson, sticky material washed over his hands. Cardin gawked in disbelief; his body was paralyzed, mind unable to process what was happening. More blood began to cover his hands. By now, they were completely coated in it. Drops of the warm liquid started running down his forearms, as if attempting to crawl up his arms.

The burly student finally reacted in the most logical way possible - screaming like a little girl.

"Agh!"

He squealed loudly, backing off from the sink. But as if by magic, or a curse, the faucets of the other sinks turned automatically. Blood erupted from several hoses in tandem. What the hell was going on in here?!

Cardin trembled in fear, and felt his heart skip a beat as a wet sensation tickled the skin underneath his eyes. Almost as if a tear rolled down his cheek. Except, he was fairly certain he *wasn't* crying.

He hesitantly reached out to touch his face, and looked at the mirror on the opposite side and-

Tears of blood seeped out of his eyes.

"Help! Someone, please help me!" Shouted the horrified huntsman-in-training, as he dashed out of the bathroom. Blood still leaking out of his eyes, and now his ears as well!

As if to complete the nightmarish scenario, he could hear a woman's laughter following him from behind; cruel and vindictive.

Cinder watched the boy run away. His desperate cries were loud enough to be heard throughout the entire building, and would without a doubt damage his reputation. But she hardly cared for something so insignificant. Was she not forced to lay low, that blood would have been the real deal instead of the illusion that he was trapped in.

"Did... Did I do good, Cinder?" Emerald asked at her side, unsure of why she'd been asked to cast an illusion on the bully. The girl didn't need to know though.

Instead, Cinder caressed her chin affectionately. The former thief leaned into her touch as expected; so obedient. A perfect instrument that could be used for her own - and more importantly - Jaune's gain.

"You did well, Emerald. Consider me pleased."