

# The Purpose of Power

**By: Logar3**

A sudden surge of Grimm during a Combat Exercise causes Jaune to unlock his Semblance far earlier than he would normally have, and his ability to amplify Aura intrigues the power-hungry Cinder Fall. With one scheming to steal the other's complete loyalty for her agenda, and the other scheming to be a true friend to a seemingly lonely girl, how will Remnant's fate be affected?

Status: ongoing

Published: 2024-05-27

Updated: 2024-07-01

Words: 34680

Chapters: 6

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Romance/Drama -  
Characters: [Jaune A., Cinder F.] Ozpin, Pyrrha N. - Reviews: 37 - Favs:  
236 - Follows: 274

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/14359578/1/The-Purpose-of-Power>

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# The Purpose of Power

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# Chapter 1

"Brothers above, how the fuck are there this many?!"

Jaune ignored the panicked shouts of the classmate he didn't know the name of as he held Crocea Mors' shield out in front of himself, swinging at the Ursa in front of him with its blade and dropping it to the ground as he cut into its brain... or whatever equivalent the Grimm had.

But while he was trying his best to keep the panicked yelling of his classmates from distracting him as waves and waves of Grimm crashed upon the hastily set up defence line he was a part of, he too wondered;

*" How the fuck **are** there this many?"*

It was supposed to be a normal field trip, an exercise to work together with a bunch of other teams to 'secure and protect' an objective from a small group of powerful Grimm... but somehow, they had attracted an entire swarm of the damn things, and had been forced to hole up in the building and fight for their lives, with Professor Port overseeing the defence.

**BA BA BAAAAAAA!**

His thoughts were interrupted when a trumpet rang from behind them, from inside the small dilapidated old building they were defending from the Grimm horde, which meant that Jaune's 'shift' as an actively fighting defender was over.

He retreated alongside his classmates and sighed in relief as the other half of their 'field trip' group took over fighting the Grimm, giving Jaune, and the rest of the people who had just been fighting, a break to catch their breath.

"Jaune! You're back!"

He glanced over at the voice that had called out to him and pushed himself to his feet again with a groan of effort, plodding along and finally dropping again in front of Ren and Pyrrha, who were also taking a break.

"Hey guys, good to be back. My arms feel like they have cars attached to them."

Ren gave him a quiet nod before closing his eyes again, and Pyrrha just smiled at him. "Well, I think you're doing an excellent job, Jaune. I saw a little bit of your fighting and I must say, you're doing well!"

Jaune couldn't help the rush of pride that shot through him at that. Pyrrha was like, the *best* at fighting in their year, her apparently being a 4-time tournament champion would do that for someone, so to hear praise from *her* specifically felt great. "Thanks, Pyr, but it is all mostly thanks to you... Your training has been really helping me."

And it really had been. A few weeks ago he couldn't imagine holding his own against so many Grimm, even with the other students around to help. But now, even when their field trip had somehow been targeted by an honest-to-goodness *swarm* of Grimm, he was still alive, and had a Grimm kill count in the dozens!

At his words, Pyrrha glanced over at Ren, her cheeks slightly darker, but the boy hadn't made any motion to indicate that he was paying attention. Jaune wasn't sure what she was worried about, he had come clean to Nora and Ren about his cheating to get into Beacon already, and the two were also aware that Pyrrha was helping him train, so why did she seem worried?

*' Oh well, I'm sure if it's a real issue she'll tell me about it'*

Pyrrha went quiet after that, seemingly content to follow Ren's lead and rest in silence to prepare for their own shift in the defence line, so Jaune amused himself by looking around and people-watching.

He spotted three-quarters of team RWBY to their right. Weiss was out on her shift in the defence line, Ruby was playing a game on her Scroll, and Yang lying down, her head in the Faunus girl's lap as they chatted. Oh, and wasn't that a surprise! Jaune thought himself fairly observant, so to find out that Blake was a Cat Faunus had been a major shock.

Team CRDL was also one that Jaune kept an eye on but for different reasons. With team RWBY it was because they were close friends, especially him and Ruby, but with team CRDL... well, after the Forever Fall incident, Jaune had made sure to keep Cardin Winchester in his sights whenever he had the chance.

There were a few other teams huddled up in the safehouse that Professor Port had brought them to, most of them unknown to Jaune, but he did spot half of team CMSN -Cinder and Mercury, he thought their names were- sitting in the corner of the safehouse looking bored while their teammates Emerald and Mint were outside fighting.

Even though he wasn't looking at them for long, both of them seemed to somehow realise he had been staring and glanced his way, so he sent them a tired wave and a smile before moving on. He wasn't personal friends with CMSN, that was more Ruby being friends with Emerald, but hey, the friends of a friend, right?

His people-watching was interrupted by the thud of boots echoing through the quiet room they were resting in as Professor Port entered, a student reloading his gun for him as he clapped his hands to get their attention.

"Alright everyone, I have received word from Beacon, and we're getting some Bullheads out here in about 30 minutes! I would like to thank you, as well and congratulate you all, for your bravery and courage after this unfortunate mess of a field trip. Your hard work has kept not just yourself, but everyone in this room safe and sound."

Grabbing his gun off the student after they finished reloading it for him, he nodded to them and the student went to sit down somewhere else. Professor Port turned back to the crowd of students, with a much more optimistic attitude about him than before he got the good news about their transport.

"Now! As we do not have much time remaining on this field trip, and you have had the opportunity to rest a spell, I am willing to let this current 'shift' in the defence be the last one I send out. But also, if you are eager or willing to, I will allow anyone that has over 50% of their Aura left to go and bolster the defensive line for the last little while."

Instinctively, something which had been hammered into him by Professor Goodwitch by now, Jaune's eyes dipped momentarily and saw that he was currently sitting at about 65-75% of his Aura. That put him well over the limit... Should he go back out there and help?

Tapping his Scroll, he saw that Ren and Pyrrha were both under the cap, at 45% and 32% respectively. He knew he had a lot of Aura, but was the difference *truly* so large?

"Our semblances, Jaune."

"Huh?"

He looked up at Pyrrha, who had a disappointed smile on her face. Had she wanted to go and support their classmates? She tapped her own Aura meter, before using her Semblance to make her Scroll float in the air for a moment. "The reason we are down more Aura than you isn't *just* because of your reserves, although that does help quite a bit. Semblances use Aura, so we've been burning more of it when fighting than you would have."

Ren nodded. "Indeed. My Semblance is particularly draining, especially since I've been using it to help divert Grimm away from people who lose their footing, or are otherwise in danger of being struck."

Jaune understood what they were saying, and was a bit conflicted. He felt like it was a good thing that he was able to go help out his friends because of his lack of a Semblance, but still... Lacking a Semblance made him stand out as weaker than his classmates, and it sucked.

Standing up, he deployed Crocea Mors' shield form and drew its sword, smiling at his teammates. "Well, duty calls, I guess. I'll make sure to cover Nora's back, you know she's probably out there doing something crazy like piloting a deathstalker by its claws."

That got a laugh out of the two of them, and Jaune was glad to be able to leave them in a good mood before he plodded over to Professor Port and informed him he was going out to help. The man checked his Aura meter and nodded to him, before stopping him with a hand on his shoulder.

"I've noticed your improvement, Mr Arc. 'Tis a Jolly good showing you've made for yourself out there. I'll be sure to let Glynda know."

Jaune smiled at the man as he patted him on the back and pushed him towards the door, but shook his head to refocus on the upcoming fighting he was about to do. His efforts in refocusing were interrupted as he bumped shoulders with someone when they both went for the door simultaneously.

"Ah, shit, sorry. You go first."

Jaune paused as the almost *glowing* amber eye that stared at him looked him up and down, and Cinder Fall, the leader of team CMSN smiled at him. "Of course, no worries at all. Best of luck out there~!"

She tapped him on the breastplate and sashayed out through the doorway in front of him, and Jaune had to mentally reboot for a moment. Cinder was an *exceptionally* beautiful woman, and to have her act so... Flirty... was off-putting in the best of ways.

Not that he trusted that attitude of hers, that is. He'd lived with enough women in his life to know when a girl was *faking* being nice and friendly. He'd seen enough guys go after Saphron to know when they were just putting it on.

Cinder was definitely like that, but he wasn't sure why she was faking her personality to *everyone*. Was it a reputation thing? Maybe she had some family she didn't want to dishonour by being mean to her classmates, or something?

He snorted to himself as he shook his head and pushed through the door out into the fighting. That theory was probably just him projecting, to be honest. But still, he couldn't help but feel *slightly* curious about the woman.

Not enough to go out of his way to talk to her, but definitely enough to notice the cruel, bored glint in her eyes as she started to slice away at the Grimm outside the safe house.

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"WOOHOO!"

Nora was having a *blast*, pun fully intended.

Her grenades had run out of stock almost two shift changes ago, but she was still fighting her hardest! The Ursa, Beowolves, and other fodder Grimm died after a couple of swings of Magnihild if that, but she had found a Deathstalker among the crowd, just like the one from initiation!

It was a surprisingly good benchmark for her improvement, as she used its own mass against it to maximise the damage Magnihild did to it. But the reason for her current cheering was that she'd finally tricked it into launching her upwards with its tail!

Gravity had released its hold on her as she was sent skyward... at least for a moment. As she reached the end of her momentum, she felt her entire body shift downwards again as gravity once more

embraced her. And while she might sometimes have dreams about breaking free from that hold and flying today, she was happy to have its pull.

It made her next move all the more lethal. "EAT THIS, YOU BUTTHOLE!"

***WHACK!***

Vibrations shook her arms as Magnihild impacted the top of the Deathstalker's head, crushing it into a fine pulp that quickly started to evaporate into... Whatever Grimm evaporated into. She let out a roar of victory as she shook out her arms, getting ready to turn and fight another of the bigger Grimm when she glanced down at her Scroll, noting the **19%** it was telling her.

*' Damn, must have landed poorly after hitting the Deathstalker! My Aura shouldn't be **that** low already!'*

She pouted in annoyance. Whatever the case for her lack of Aura, it meant that she was in the red, which meant she had to tag out. "Damnit!"

She stomped her foot in frustration and turned to head back to the Safehouse... Only for her remaining Aura to tingle as she sensed something attacking from behind her. "Wha- GAH!"

She saw a flash of black, red and white in her vision before she felt herself get *slammed* into, her Aura shattering and her consciousness fading as she was thrown back towards the safe house.

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"Arc! Get over here, NOW!"

Jaune finished stabbing into the head of a Beowolf and darted over to where he heard Weiss screaming for him. He made sure to let his other students know that he was backing off, and they closed the gap he created as he pulled back and darted towards where he

could see one of Weiss' Glyphs hovering in the air, holding...  
"NORA!"

Weiss huffed as a dart of ice shot out from the tip of Myrtenaster, impaling an Ursa and dropping it to the ground. "Her Aura is out and she's injured. I think there might be a Ursa Major in the swarm that got her. Is she okay? I caught her after she was sent practically flying back here, over the Grimm."

Weiss' Glyph shut off as Jaune got his arms under Nora, and he immediately moved back slightly from the fighting, putting her on the ground. "Nora! Are you okay? Nora?"

His throat closed up as he looked down and saw that his jeans were stained slightly red. "Weiss! She's unconscious, and bleeding pretty badly!"

He saw Weiss stiffen, indicating that she had definitely heard him, but she was too focused on fighting to turn around. Realising she wasn't going to be able to help, Jaune's forehead wrinkled from the spike of fear that shot through him.

"I'm taking her inside, be safe!"

Grabbing Nora in his arms again, he stumbled back into the house, thudding loudly across the floorboards as he heard shouts of alarm from his fellow students. He reached the area where people who had been hurt were supposed to go and placed Nora on one of the beds, flinching as Ren, Pyrrha, and team RWBY (bar Weiss) practically *crashed* into his back.

"Jaune, what's going on?! Is Nora alright?"

Jaune frowned at Ren's panicked voice, the other boy usually being a solid source of stoicism. Nora was clearly a bit of a panic button, so Jaune made sure to try and keep his voice as steady as he could.

He reached over to a nearby first aid kit, thanking the lord for family camping trips to the middle of nowhere and parents who demanded every kid knew how to bandage an injury. "Weiss saw her get swatted by an Ursa Major. She's out cold and bleeding. "Yang, can you rip open the bottom bit of her top?"

It spoke to the fear of Nora being injured that no one, not even Yang, teased him about making that request, and Yang immediately grabbed Nora's top and tore it open, a hiss of anger escaping her as a nasty cut appeared from under the bloodstained cloth.

Jaune got to work immediately, pouring the saline solution into the wound and doing his best to bandage it while he got Pyrrha to put pressure on the cut. It was in a bad spot for a bandage, with Jaune having to loop all the way around her torso, but he did so anyway, with Ren and Blake helping to lift her when needed.

Eventually, he finished bandaging her but even he could tell that it wasn't gonna be enough. The bandage itself was already bloodstained to hell and back, and they didn't have any spare clothes.

"Shit, shit! Nora, cmon, you got this. You're strong, Nora! I believe you can get through this!"

His sight was blurred by tears as they dripped from his eyes onto his hands, his Aura seemingly to fizzle slightly as they made contact... Wait, his Aura? Confusion shot through Jaune as he frowned, wiping away at his eyes and seeing his hands glowing.

"What?"

Something was happening with his Aura, the whitish-golden colour seeming to fan out from his palms, turning into a vibrant pink as it reached Nora's body. And there was... *Something* in the back of his mind, some sense he hadn't been aware of prior telling him... Something. "Wait, my Aura is doing something! Someone check Nora!"

Ruby was quicker than anyone else as she tapped Nora on the arm with her Scroll, syncing it to her Aura tracker app, and seeing the bar slowly fill up, going from empty, to red, and starting to hover around bottom-yellow as Nora started coughing, her Aura's healing clearly coming into effect.

"Jaune, is this you?"

Jaune looked up at Pyrrha, who was grinning ear to ear as she looked down at his hands, which the weird new sense in the back of his mind told him was feeding his Aura into Nora. "I think... I think it is, yeah."

"You finally got your Semblance!"

If he didn't already have the attention of all the students waiting around in the safehouse, he was sure that he did now. "You really think so?"

Blake nodded, patting him on the shoulder for a moment, but pulling back rather quickly as the part of his Aura she touched faded into her own purple. A quick look at her own Scroll caused her to smile at him. "This is definitely not something everyone can do with their Aura. I think you're... Giving Nora Aura somehow, or boosting hers. Mine just jumped up a few per cent as well."

Jaune's heart soared as the realisation shot through him, and he felt his hand's pulse again, the flow of Aura almost seeming to redouble its power now that he was *aware* of what he was doing. And he was doing really well, it seemed, because Nora let out a groan of pain as their combined Aura got her to the point where she woke up.

"Shit... did anyone get the plate of the truck that hit me?"

"NORA!"

Jaune was almost pushed out of the way by the speed at which Ren shot forward to wrap Nora up in a hug, and even as she *clearly*

wincing her way through the pain of his impact, she reciprocated the hug, before seemingly noticing what Jaune was doing.

"Wait, what're you doing, Jauney?"

He looked up from his glowing hands and met her eyes, and a shaky smile formed on his face. "Y-you got hurt... and I discovered my Semblance. It's giving you some of my Aura, I think. Or boosting your Aura... Either way, it's helping you heal. Just stay lying down for a second, alright?"

Nora was clearly excited by the news of his Semblance awakening, and would likely grill him about it later, but for now, she let herself get pushed back down to the bed by a distraught-looking Ren, and Jaune could have sworn he saw her going red as Ren pinned her arms.

He chose to ignore the horniness of his patient and instead focus on the Aura that connected them... Only to find that the sixth sense his Semblance had created was telling him that there was nothing left for him to do.

"I-I'm... done?"

The crowd around him were just as surprised as he was, and he quickly pulled at the scraps of Nora's shirt, gasping as she saw nothing where the cut had been but the tiniest of scars, and even then, that faded under a flash of brightly-glowing pink Aura.

The sense from his Semblance was telling him that Nora was topped up on Aura, sitting at maximum capacity, but not only that, exceeding that, with his Aura *amplifying* her own. He tapped her on the arm with his Scroll and it recalibrated for a second, showing an error screen after telling them that she was currently sitting on about 180-200% Aura.

Jaune took his hands away from Nora, feeling his Semblance fading into the background, but not disappearing completely, just... Waiting,

for the next time he needed or wanted to use it.

He held his hands out in front of himself and pressed the mental button and saw his hands start to glow on their own, his own Aura feeling stronger because of it. His focus was shattered, however, and his hands dimmed, as the sound of a trumpet blared throughout the building.

**BA BA BAAAAAAA!**

As Professor Port entered the room, Jaune tried to recapture that feeling of power, but whatever 'zone' he had entered to get a hold of it so easily faded with the entrance of his teacher. He sighed to himself, but mentally he was cheering. He had finally gotten his Semblance!

"Alright, everyone! We are T-minus 3 minutes from our Bullheads arriving, so everyone above 30% Aura, go out there and help give us the chance to get everyone onto them! Do your best out there! Extra Credit will be given to everyone for today, so don't go thinking of this as a completely horrible experience! HA HA HA!"

Jaune checked his own Aura on his scroll. It blipped a solid 37% at him, more than he had expected to have by this point, especially after healing Nora. Still, he smiled, grabbed both halves of Crocea Mors, and exited the door alongside Pyrrha and the rest of team RWBY, grinning wildly.

He couldn't wait to get to training his new Semblance!

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Cinder Fall was... Bored.

Not just bored, however, she was also annoyed, upset, frustrated, and more importantly fucking *sick* of the Grimm for the time being. Even knowing that she was working for the Queen of the Grimm, they were too far away from Evernight Castle for Salem's direct

influence to reach these Grimm, meaning they still attacked her and her minions with their full might.

Although to be fair, that was a good thing for their cover. Having a trio of exchange students somehow being ignored by the otherwise incredibly riled-up Grimm swarm would have put *much* undue suspicion on them, especially with Ozpin having likely told most of his trusted circle about Salem and her abilities.

And while she usually liked fighting, or at least in the sense that she liked showcasing her overwhelming power compared to these *children*, she hadn't gotten the chance to go all out. She had been forced to stick to the abilities given to her by her Semblance and nothing else, for using the Maiden's flames would have immediately ticked Ozpin's lackey Port off about her 'new abilities', if not her true identity if the old wizard trusted the blowhard enough to tell him about the Maidens.

But, what she enjoyed even less than the fighting, even as handicapped as she was, was the flight back on the Bullheads. How on earth could these students think they had acquitted themselves well? They had been stuck there for over 12 hours, and they hadn't even cleared out the swarm in its entirety!

If they had any modicum of *true* power, then the swarm would have been absolutely routed by the veritable army of supposed 'aspiring huntsmen', but it had not. Instead, she had been forced to limit herself, to play along with this absolute farce of a performance she was putting on, and wait for the damned school to send them evac Bullheads.

But the thing that was really pissing her off was having to listen to the two other groups of students in their Bullhead gush over their own performances. Sure, she had volunteered her team to fly alongside Team RWBY and Team JNPR, mainly to keep an eye on Ozpin's favourite student Ruby Rose, and the best candidate for the other half of the Fall Maiden's powers, Pyrrha Nikos, but it still

bugged her to have to listen to Valkyrie go on her *third* identical story about the Deathstalker she had fought.

"Are you alright, Cinder? You look upset?"

Cinder grunted as Emerald spoke to her, glancing in the direction of her 'team'. Mercury seemed relaxed now that the fighting was over, but her keen eyes let her clearly see that he was still in 'fight mode', his posture looking just *slightly* too relaxed to be real.

Neo, or 'Mint' as she was now, was lying on the floor and scrolling through some website on her Scroll, tapping away at her keyboard as she likely got into some sort of argument or another with someone online about ice cream or whatever inane things Neo enjoyed.

And then Emerald herself seemed antsy. Cinder had told her to try and get close to team RWBY, but it was so *painfully* obvious on her face that she would rather see if Cinder herself was okay than follow that order. Which was frustrating, to say the least, but easily worked around.

"I am fine, thank you. Merely annoyed at the circumstances we found ourselves in. I will be charging Beacon for the damages to my outfit, to be sure. Now... Don't you have something to be doing?"

Emerald, like usual, took the answer at face value, nodding happily to herself as she pushed herself to her feet and plodded over to Team RWBY, striking up a conversation with Ruby Rose and Weiss Schnee. Cinder couldn't help but roll her eyes as the girl walked away from her. Her undying loyalty was a small price to pay for having to deal with such infatuation, but it was truly annoying sometimes.

"And then I got hit and I was apparently like ZOOM over the Grimm and then Weiss-Cream caught me with one of those Glyphs of hers, and then Jaune brought me inside and then BAM! Semblance time!"

Anything to stave off the boredom, Cinder actually tuned into Valkyrie's latest tale. She had moved on from stories about her fighting it seemed, moving onto... Jaune, their team leader, she thought, discovering his Semblance?

That was interesting enough to listen in on... Keeping up her information on the abilities of her classmates would make it all the easier to take them out later when Beacon fell.

"Haha, Nora, everyone was there when it happened, they know this already."

"And they know how awesome I am when I'm fighting already too but I still told them all about it! Let me brag about you, Fearless leader!"

Cinder raised an eyebrow at the nickname, but otherwise made it seem like she was focused on her scroll, and not the chattering of Valkyrie. The girl continued as Jaune seemed to acquiesce to her, a grin on her face. "He totally can like, share his Aura! It felt so cool, it was all like, *woosh*, and *vvvrrmmm*, and *shabam!* And then I was all better, in just minutes!"

Cinder could feel herself perking up slightly at that. A Semblance to share Aura, to give it to others, was a very useful one indeed. Plus, if the boy was a healer, then he would have to be a primary target in the future, as leaving him alive before taking out another target could cause that target to survive due to his interference.

As her brain started to plot out the poor boy's death, Jaune himself spoke up. "Uh, that's technically kinda wrong, Nora. I wasn't *just* giving you Aura, although I do think it was a little of that. I was also kind of... Amplifying your Aura? It's hard to explain. But I was giving you some, turning it into your own Aura, and then making *that* Aura stronger as well. You were sitting on about 200% or something when I was done."

"Yea! And even now that it's faded back down, my Scroll *still* says that I'm on 105% Aura! I think you might have kinda permabuffed

me, Jauney! Thanks a million!"

" *Nora!* You should keep something like that to yourself! What if our classmates heard you, they'd bug him about it all day every day for the rest of our time at Beacon!"

Lie Ren was ever the voice of reason on JNPR, but Cinder was very adept at acting, and with him not saying anything further, she guessed that he thought she didn't hear Valkyrie's words. But still... *that* caused Cinder to pay attention. A semblance that... *Amplified Aura?* To such an extent as a 100% boost, some of it even potentially being longer lasting, or even maybe permanent?!

Such a thing would absolutely cement his place as a high-priority target for death! If left alive, he could *easily* throw a wrench into her plans by healing a target! Already her plans shifted in her mind, thinking of ways to get rid of the boy without casting suspicion on herself, until finally, she thought...

' *What if I had that power in **my** arsenal?*

She paused as the thought hit her. Her first instinct was to kill the boy, to get rid of a problem before it became ever worse as he mastered his Semblance, but... what if she instead *helped* him master his Semblance? Convinced him to use it on her, to give *her* the extra power his Semblance offered?

It would likely require her to, *ugh*, **befriend** the boy, but she had made bigger sacrifices for power before. A painful tingle that shot down her spine at that thought was a reminder enough of that.

Yes, she could definitely do that. Especially with his reaction to her earlier, it was clear he found her attractive, not that she was very surprised about that, but that *would* indicate that it should be possible for her to worm her way into his friend group to gain access to his Semblance.

She nodded to herself, glancing over at Jaune Arc. He would be her newest target, in a much less lethal way than her other targets, of course, but a target nonetheless. And when she was done with him, she'd have him in the palm of her hand, her own personal battery of Aura Amplification.

Perhaps he might in time allow her to merely *call* for the other half of the Maiden powers, her soul so overwhelmingly strong under the effects of his Semblance that it was *ripped* from that useless woman Qrow Branwen had to rescue?

A smile formed on her face. Yes... This was a plan *worth* attempting. And if he refused to give her the power she desired from him, or even failed to be worth the effort? Well, she had seen him in Miss Goodwitch's combat class.

It wouldn't be hard to get rid of him if need be.

## Chapter 2

Jauney was already one of her favourite people.

But after the exercise where she got hurt, and he had discovered his Semblance and saved her life? Well, that seemed to have *amplified* his popularity with everyone! As she looked around at the small group of people around their lunch table, asking Jaune about his Semblance, Nora gave herself a mental high five for the Yang-Worthy pun.

Sure, most of those people were only giving him the time of day because they wanted to see how his Semblance felt, and maybe get a boost for the day, but... It was better than the ridicule she knew he received behind his back before!

Slightly. Probably. Maybe? Was fake friendship better than real non-friendship? She sure didn't know! Maybe Ren would, though?

She turned to ask Ren the question and almost choked on the pancake she was currently eating, earning a concerned ' *tut*' from the boy in question as he hit her on the back, helping to stop her from choking.

"Chew. Then swallow, Nora. *Then* ask me whatever you're thinking."

She giggled to herself as Ren seemed to read her mind like he always did. She chomped away at the last of the pancake in her mouth. Then she double-checked to make sure she hadn't immediately stuffed another one in there before she whispered her question to the boy.

Ren was silent for a moment, his eyes closed in intense focus as she thought about how to answer her. Or he was just sleepy. She wasn't quite as adept at reading Ren's mind as he was hers. Otherwise, she would have already figured out if he lik-

'AH!'

Slamming the book on that train of thought, she bobbed in place. At the same time, she waited for Ren's answer, watching as the crowd thinned as Jaune used small bursts of his Semblance on people, the different colours of Aura flashing underneath his hands.

"I believe... that would be up to Jaune himself."

Nora's shoulders dropped at Ren's non-answer. "C'mon, Renny! Surely you can do better than that. What would *you* prefer if you were in that situation?"

Ren hummed as he sliced off a bit of pancake and chewed on it, glancing at Jaune as he did so. "Personally, I don't really care about what anyone has to say about me, other than the people I care about. So... I would tell everyone to leave me alone, and likely only use the Semblance on those who needed it, or my friends, but Jaune..."

He grinned softly as he looked at their fearless leader, and Nora smiled too, seeing the happy grin on Jaune's face as even the usually standoff-ish *Cinder Fall* strode up to him, striking up a conversation.

Ren continued after a moment of watching the two speak. "Jaune, at least right now, is very sensitive to how he is *perceived* . Do you remember how he was with Cardin when his *secret* was revealed to the boy?"

Nora's smile dropped as she remembered *that* little section of their life at Beacon. It had *sucked*, seeing Jaune drop all of his responsibilities as their leader, and even neglect their friendship, just to dance to the whims of a bully like Cardin, but she understood why he'd done it after Jaune and Pyrrha had revealed how he'd gotten into Beacon, and the dirt Cardin had on him.

Seeing where Ren was going with this, Nora nodded, her hands coming up to her cheeks, squishing them into her palms as she rested her head on them. "Yeah, I 'member."

Ren nodded to her as he finished off his plate of pancakes, pushing his plate and cutlery forward. "I believe that Jaune will continue to fuel this 'fake non-friendship' as you put it until he either; gets hurt, or people forget about him, and his Semblance just... Becomes a part of Jaune Arc, instead of this new, flashy thing."

Nora hummed, before suddenly glomping Ren in a side hug that had him letting out a small grunt of surprise before surrendering to her grip. "Thanks, Renny! Knew you'd have a good answer. You're smart about all that junk!"

Ren dutifully allowed her to finish her side hug, so she eventually let him go, the boy settling back into his seat with a dull 'thud' and a small wince. Turning back to her fearless leader, she saw him still talking with Cinder Fall, the girl's Aura still flaring up a fire-like Orange, somehow brighter than all the others.

Whatever they were talking about that was taking so long, Nora could tell that their other teammate, the ever-adorable and badass Pyrrha, was feeling upset about how Jaune's focus was so squarely on the beautiful exchange student.

Nora just sighed as she tapped at the table, before turning and throwing a grape at Yang, a funny tradition she still followed after their massive battle in this very cafeteria. Of course, she was rooting for Pyrrha, but it was clear the girl was torturing herself by not just fessing up to Jaune already!

Not that *she* had much room to talk but... Nora grumbled to herself at her own brain's betrayal and threw another handful of grapes in Yang's general direction, pelting team RWBY with a shotgun blast of fruit.

She giggled at that, almost a little disappointed when it didn't devolve into another food fight. Maybe that only happened if you hit Weiss with something messy. Hmm...

A theory to test another day.

---

"Hello. You're Jaune Arc, right?"

Jaune shook his hands, his constant use of his Semblance during their lunch break so far causing them to be absolutely awash with boosted Aura, and feeling a little tingly as a result. Turning to look at the voice, he paused in surprise for a moment at who was speaking to him.

Cinder Fall.

Not the first, second, or even third person he would have ever expected to strike up a conversation with him, to be honest. She usually spent her time outside of classes either on her Scroll, ignoring her teammates, or sitting by her lonesome as she stared contemplatively out the window. That was the usual, however, but to come talk to him now, so soon after he got his Semblance... It probably wasn't as subtle as she thought.

"That's me! It's nice to meet you. Were you wanting to see my Semblance as well?"

Something flashed across her face at his question, but it was gone too quickly for him to see what it was. Instead, a confident smile grew on her face as she cocked a hip out to the side, a hand coming to rest on it.

"Actually, no. I merely wanted to congratulate you on unlocking it, and to ask... Well, I was wondering if you would like to spar with me from time to time?"

No, he *definitely* did not look at her thighs when she did that, but even if he had... Sue him, Cinder was *hot*. Still, her answer surprised him. Raising an eyebrow at her, he turned his Semblance off, allowing his Aura to return to normal. "Oh, uh, thank you then. Sorry for assuming and all that."

He wasn't *actually* sorry, because he was fairly sure that she was just being a bit more subtle about wanting to see his Semblance, but Cinder waved him off, so he reckoned there were no worries there and he continued.

"And on the sparring thing, I mean I wouldn't be opposed to it, but I will say that I might not be the most challenging of opponents."

There was a slight glow of amusement to her smile as he said it. He could tell that even if she wasn't outright making fun of him for it, the image of him during Combat class was likely playing through her head.

"I am aware of your skill level, Jaune. It's actually part of why I offered. I saw you fighting before you unlocked your Semblance, and I had some ideas on some ways you could improve. Plus, *my* mentor had a Semblance that boosted his defensive capabilities, so maybe I could pass on some tips for your own?"

Jaune paused and actually considered the offer for a moment. He was still almost sure that she was just taking the whole 'get him to use his Semblance on her' thing slowly and *trying* to be subtle, but the clear jump from 'we've literally never had a conversation' to 'I wanna train you and be friends' was rather jarring.

*But*, extra training from *another* one of the large amount of very skilled Huntresses in Beacon. If he had improved enough to fight Grimm with only Pyrrha's guidance so far... would this help him catch up even faster?

"I wouldn't be opposed to training together every now and then, thank you! I promise to try and not slow you down too much, though,

haha!"

His awkward joke got a *perfect* laugh out of the girl, and Jaune couldn't help but frown internally. It really was a perfect laugh. It was beautiful, and he could almost still hear it ringing through his brain after she stopped. "Wonderful, my Scroll number is 248-434-5508, why don't you message me later and we can figure out a time?"

As he tapped her number into his Scroll, he hummed to himself.

While he wasn't an expert on women in a romantic sense, he still grew up around 8 other women, so he was able to tell just how fake that laugh was, even if it might fool most others. Plus the whole 'faking it' vibe he had constantly gotten from the girl... He was now *sure* that she was just trying to be friends with him for his Semblance...

A test, then?

He wasn't usually one to spring things like this on others, but if she wanted to be training buddies, then even if she was just trying to use him, he had to be sure she wouldn't get blinded by his Semblance and ignore actually helping him train.

She'd offered it like a good deed, but... With her clear interest in his Semblance, he guessed it was more like a trade, in his eyes? Even if she probably didn't think he had her sussed out. He raised his right hand and activated his Semblance, wreathing it in bright white light. "Okay, I'll message you after the school day ends. Also, while you're here I guess, would you like to see my Semblance?"

His test seemed successful as her eyes darted down to his hand for the *briefest* of instants. That was confirmation enough to him that she wanted to use his new Semblance, but... He also kinda felt bad for her.

As hot and seductive as Cinder seemed, she was a bit of an enigma to everyone. She barely ever interacted with anyone, had a mean

streak when it came to Combat class and, to him at least, was putting on a fake personality almost 24/7.

Could it be that Cinder was... Lonely? She clearly *seemed* lonely, if all of his experience seeing his Sisters through various stages of their lives said anything. Maybe he *should* try and be her friend?

Even though she had quickly quelled the look of *hunger* in her eyes at the sight of his Semblance she still did hold a hand out towards him, winking at him. "If it is so impressive as to have drawn a crowd I guess I must."

Jaune internally snorted at that justification, as if he hadn't been worried she would tackle his hand a second ago. Reaching forward he laid his hand on Cinder's and activated his Semblance, but was surprised to see that instead of just the normal glow... Cinder looked like she was *aflame* .

Yes, it was still bright, but where others' Aura just glowed under his Semblance, Cinder's Aura *rippled* and *twisted* while remaining contained to the area around her body, like a flame trapped in a fireplace.

" *Woah*"

The words were pulled out of him on accident as he watched her Aura shimmer, and it seemed to cause Cinder to come to her senses again as well, a look of excitement on her face, marred only by a glimmer of... Concern? In her eyes.

But why?

Whatever the case, she quickly pulled her hand away from his, the Aura boost quickly fading from view -although he knew the actual boost stuck around longer by now- and stared at it, that same look of excitement staying on her face as she looked in his direction, meeting his eyes.

Before Jaune could say anything, however, Cinder took a half-step back, before turning around fully. She paused as she did so and looked back at him, an unreadable expression on her face. "I will... See you later, Jaune Arc."

Jaune just smiled at her, waving his hand slightly as she practically *marched* off, walking past her teammates Mercury and Emerald - Mint wasn't there, it seemed- and dragging them with her. He didn't get much of a chance to keep watching, however, as Coco pushed Velvet towards him, dragging her sunglasses slightly down her nose.

"Yo, Arc! Can we see what your Semblance is like? It's pretty hot gos at the moment!"

Jaune just laughed, reaching out a hand for the both of them. Coco grabbed it like a handshake while Velvet -the much more timid of the two- just held her hand out. He knew he didn't *actually* have to touch anyone to boost them so he didn't let his hand hover over Velvets to be considerate to her, something she clearly appreciated from her smile.

After those two ran off to show off to their teammates, Jaune had... Ran out of people who were interested in trying out his Semblance. At least for *this* very moment, it would seem! He couldn't help but smile to himself as he turned back around in his seat and finally ate the last of his meal, the sandwich having tempted him the entire time he had been crowded.

He was glad to have finally unlocked his Semblance, and he was very much enjoying the boost in popularity it was giving him! Like, in what world where he *didn't* have his Semblance would *Cinder Fall* of all people come up and offer to help train him?

Jaune chuckled under his breath, remembering her practically *running* off after getting the Aura boost. Did she even realise that her face was red as she did so? Probably not, she was usually so intentionally put together that he doubted she would have noticed.

In any case, his food time was interrupted by the bell going off, causing him to have to eat the rest of his sandwich as he jogged to Combat class with Miss Goodwitch alongside his friends and teammates.

Maybe today would go better for him, now that he had his Semblance?

---

"The winner of this match is Jaune Arc!"

Semblances were *fascinating* .

Cinder had her own, of course, but seeing the change in Jaune Arc's ability to fight his fellow students change so much merely from unlocking it... She was just even more sure that she had made the correct choice and approached him early to -she mentally sighed- ingratiate herself with him.

She hadn't been lying when she had told Jaune that she knew of his talents -or lack thereof- in the arena. Over the last few weeks of her infiltration, she had watched Cardin Winchester (Why was it always him? She vaguely wondered if Goodwitch was incompetent or trying to prove a point to one of them) beat Jaune into the ground many times with very little resistance.

But now?

Now, Cardin Winchester was essentially *sulking* off to the side of the arena while his teammates spoke to him and Jaune Arc was standing with team JNPR, looking almost surprised as the rest of the class was at Miss Goodwitch's declaration.

Cinder spared a glance to the screen above the arena, which was still synced to the two boy's Scrolls, and hummed in interest as Jaune's *visibly* started to go back up as she watched, slowly rising from the middle of the 'yellow' stage to the lowest part of 'green.'

Truly *fascinating* .

He had not improved from his last fight in any significant metric of skill, albeit slightly better for the assignment he discovered his Semblance in being so combat-filled, but the real difference was just that, his Semblance.

He'd already had an impressive amount of Aura, that was something she *had* noticed, lasting much longer than he should have, even if he was taking massive hits from the Winchester brat, but now that he was able to use his Semblance to amplify that already large pool, it was like he had stepped up and entire league in the classroom.

Enhanced strength, the ability to take more hits, and an honestly surprising amount of explosive speed when he launched forward to start the fight. He did not have the finesse needed to *control* said explosive speed just yet, having caused himself to crash right into Winchester's armour at high speed, but that would come with time and practice.

Both of which Cinder would be assisting him with, in order to gain access to the permanent side effects of his Semblance. A smug smile formed on her face at the very thought of near-effortless, permanent increases in her power.

She leaned back from the railing of the raised section the viewing area was sitting upon and hummed in satisfaction when she saw Emerald taking notes on the fight as she had asked her to. Not that she had any doubt in the girl's willingness to follow her orders, of course, but it was nice to know that the job was being done either way.

"Ma'am, I'm done."

Ah, perfect timing it seemed. Even as she was looking in Emerald's direction, the girl raised her head and passed the book over to her subtly, using her sleight of hand to its fullest. Cinder took the book off her and rolled her eyes.

They were, for all intents and purposes, classmates, and thus sharing notes was not only allowed but encouraged. Still, old habits die hard, and Emerald's habit of being sneaky amongst crowds was old indeed.

Still, as she scanned the notes, which were not only detailed but seemingly *time-tracked* on when Jaune had done certain things with his Semblance, as well as theories on what *exactly* he had done, was more than she had asked the girl for.

"Excellent work, Emerald. Well done."

The girl preened under her praise even while Mercury groaned in disgust at her reaction, causing Emerald to swipe at him, which caused him to kick back at her, which caused them to start fighting, which caused...

"Both of you, stop it."

Her to step in.

Emerald froze *immediately* at her words and got the lightest tap of one of Mercury's boots on her shoulder for it as the boy tried to hold his leg back mid-kick. Cinder just sighed. Working with these two was tiring but it *was* good to have loyal minions, if for different reasons.

Her eyes turned to Jaune at that thought, and a wicked smile grew on her face.

*' I wonder for **what reason** I can make him loyal. Will I have to force his loyalty from him when he finds out my plans? Or maybe he will be as dense as he usually is and will **fall** for the woman helping him train out of the goodness of her heart, offering himself to me on his own?'*

She couldn't wait to find out.

---

Jaune met the rest of his team's eyes as he stood in the doorway of his dorm room, in his full combat gear.

It was a couple of days after his first-ever in-class win against Cardin, and he was about to head out for his first training session with Cinder. Well, he had *been* about to leave when the others stopped him, urging him to reconsider going and training with Cinder...

By telling him that she was just using him for his Semblance.

It actually kind of hurt, that they thought he was so dense. "Oh, don't worry, I 100% know she's using me. I just plan on using her back."

"What?"

Again, another tiny feeling of hurt entered him as he saw his teammates shocked, and confused, expressions. Did they **really** think he was so unobservant? He grew up with **8** women in his life! He could read women pretty well!

Well, except for Weiss, initially, otherwise he would have known that trying to woo her like he had seen in romance movies was a *terrible* idea.

Nodding, Jaune shrugged at them as he laughed softly. "Yeah, she was kinda obvious about it, even if she probably *thought* she was being subtle. The pretty exchange student approaches *me of all people* for the first time the *day after* I unlock my Semblance? Hell, I wouldn't trust it to not be about my Semblance even if it had been *Ruby* who asked me at that point."

His words were met with silence. Hopefully, it was a contemplative one where they reevaluated him in their minds and added 'perceptive' to whatever sorting system they had him under so he just flashed them a smile.

"So yeah, I know. But that's the thing. If my Semblance helps me, like, *pay* for training with powerful people, then why not use them like how they want to use me?"

Pyrrha raised a hand at that, a hopeful look on her face as she spoke. "But what about our training? Is that not enough?"

Jaune flinched, knowing he had to be careful about how he answered it. "No, no, Pyrrha, our training is wonderful. Brothers know I wouldn't have gotten anywhere near the level I have without you, I just... Miss Goodwitch keeps telling us that it's good to spar against multiple people, right? Even if she always seems to put me up against Cardin, the bastard."

He stepped forward and placed a hand on Pyrrha's shoulder, nodding once as she met her eyes. "I just want to be the absolute best I can be. You've pushed me far, farther than I ever thought I could get, and I hope to continue training with you, but I also want to spar with as many powerful people as I can, and get strong enough to *really* stand by your side, by all three of your sides."

He'd stepped back and looked at both Nora and Ren as he spoke that last bit, and he could tell that he had convinced them. Mainly because Nora was crying and shaking Ren like a flag at the start of a race, but mostly because he was so in tune with his team by now and could just totally sense it, yeah.

Hell, he must have gotten better at speeches or something as well, because Pyrrha was even *blushing* slightly! He had to admit that it certainly made him feel more leader-y if he could get such a reaction out of the three of them.

"Alright, I really do have to head out now, otherwise I'm going to be late. And she's gonna be beating my ass anyway, might as well not make her angry, right? Haha!"

He got no arguments this time, only a chorus of 'Have a good training!' as he entered the hallway and shut the dorm room's door.

Turning left, he headed towards the school building, and more specifically to the student training rooms.

It was time to sell his soul for extra training... Literally.

---

Cinder felt... Excited.

It was odd. She cared so very little for so many things in this world, so to feel excited was a rare thing for her. The only other thing that usually evoked this feeling from her was scheming, and planning around Beacon and their defences.

But, as Jaune entered the room, she actually felt... *Happy to see him*. It felt disgusting. But, knowing that she was about to take the first steps into getting him under her spell, into getting his Semblance in her hands and used for her benefit... It was exciting, she had to admit.

"Jaune, you made it. A pleasure to see you again."

The boy shot her a smile she could only describe as 'goofy' her way as he approached her, adjusting one of his shoulder guards as he did so. She wondered why he even bothered wearing armour when he had such a large pool of Aura, and now the ability to enhance it even further, but to each their own, she supposed. Maybe he would grow past it as he realised how useless it was.

"Hey, Cinder! Sorry if I'm late, my team had some things they needed to talk to me about before I left and we went a bit longer than I thought we would."

Cinder pursed her lips in an amused smile at that, mentally rolling her eyes as she read between the lines. Yes, she could imagine that team JNPR *would be* vocally against their leader training with the strange woman who they likely suspected just wanted him for his Semblance...

They were right, of course, but Jaune himself seemed oblivious to the fact.

Cinder just waved off his words, sending a smile that had melted better men's hearts his way as she motioned towards the training grounds. "It's no issue, I assure you, I only just arrived myself."

Jaune grinned at that and followed her down into the arena itself, and the both of them synced their Scrolls to the Aura Tracker, both of their pictures appearing on the screen above them with a green bar below it.

Cinder knew that for unsupervised training like this, the Arena's safeguards would kick in closer to 40%, rather than the 20% that signified the 'red' section of the bar, for safety's sake. That was marginally annoying, but luckily, she was training against the person in Beacon who could likely recover their Aura after being depleted the fastest.

She turned on the spot as she reached the other side of the arena they would be sparring in, and flashed Jaune a smile. It was annoying to have to keep this persona going, but she had to have some kind of bait on her hook. Once he was hooked, however, she would be able to slowly allow the truth to surface as he fell more and more in her control.

Jaune stood across from her as he unsheathed his sword, and then expanded its sheath into its shield form. The boy nodded to her, and she smirked, drawing one of her swords -Not Midnight, which required her Semblance, but still good- and falling into a combat stance.

She met Jaune's eyes and saw a surprising lack of concern as he squared off against her. Was he that confident in himself, even with his comparative lack of skill to her? No, *no one* could be that delusional.

A small laugh escaped her as she realised why he was so calm. The fool *knew* he stood no chance and therefore had no expectations of victory anyway. If this was anything other than a spar, she would have relished in the feeling, but as it was *technically* meant to be a learning experience...

It would be *rather* suspicious if he did not improve *at all* under her tutelage, but she still got her boosts. It would eventually make it clear that she was wasting his time. It might help in the short term to get more boosts quickly, but she was *investing* in Jaune and his Semblance, and that meant playing the long game.

"A moment before we begin."

Jaune's stance loosened as she spoke, and he looked confused.  
"Uh, sure. Is something wrong?"

She cocked her head to the side and hummed, wagging the sword in her hand back and forth as she took a couple of steps towards him.  
"Not 'wrong' per se, but something we will be working on nonetheless. You have no confidence that you will win this spar, do you?"

Jaune paused and she knew that she was right, especially as he looked nervous and a little embarrassed at being called out on it. Sighing, she stopped in front of him and tapped his chest plate with the tip of her sword.

"To win a fight, you have to be able to *picture* winning a fight. You have to be able to see a future where you are stronger than your opponent, a future where you can snatch victory from them. Without this, you are fated to lose."

She saw him purse his lips and look away from her, clearly either not believing her or just unable to picture it. She knew the boy trained with Nikos... Did that girl not hold back at all during it? Or did she just still win every time? That was the only reason she could think

that Jaune would be so accustomed to failure before he even started. How could a novice be expected to beat a Champion?

Sheathing her sword, she crossed her arms, tapping a finger on her forearm and thinking. "How about this, then. You have some form of training that you can do by yourself, right?"

Jaune nodded, which was good. Although if he didn't, then that would have immediately allowed her to solve one problem today. "Good. Go through one cycle of your practice, and I will give some critiques... And *then* we can give sparring a go. Throwing you in the deep end was a bit hasty, I admit."

She watched his expression as she talked, and was interested to see a look of both relief and frustration flash across his face before he schooled it and focused on his movements as she started slashing at the air.

Relieved to have the extra time before the fight, but disappointed that he needed it? That definitely sounded correct from what information she had been able to gather about him. Cinder watched him run through his practice and gave a couple of comments as he moved through the different forms and stances the Nikos girl had been drilling into him.

Basic moves, with no flourish or character... But that was for the best at his skill level. If nothing else, she would admit that Nikos had the makings of a good tutor. A touch too light-touched to really hammer her lessons into such a dense mind as an overconfident teen boy's, but not terrible.

But Nikos had nothing on *her* .

As Jaune finished his sets, she strode forward and nodded to him, smiling. "Good work, Jaune. I could see a few minor improvements already from the feedback I gave you. Well done incorporating it so quickly."

Her own voice felt gross to hear as she spewed compliments and flattery, but it was necessary to bring up his improvement whenever she could without feeling overbearing about it, especially emphasising that it was *her* fault for the improvement. She needed to condition him to subconsciously feel indebted to her, that he needed to pay her back somehow.

And then she would have her prize. Her own personal Aura battery and booster, loyal to her without question. She was shooting for a loyalty more similar to Emerald's than Mercury or Roman's, as it was *far* more stable and much easier to cultivate while maintaining her cover.

Jaune just gave an embarrassed smile at her words, his eyes closing as he nodded. "Thanks, Cinder. Some of it felt a bit weird but I guess that's mainly cause it's the first time doing it with the changes, right? Anyway, I think I'm ready to spar now."

A feral grin escaped her before being quickly smothered and wrangled into a wry smile as she put a hand on her hip, cocking it out to the side slightly. "Splendid. Then rest for a moment and take your position, and we can begin."

He did so, and they began to spar, and... There was no surprise in the outcome. She wiped the floor with him the first time. And the second. It was on her third victory that she started to critique his movements and attacks during the fight, and after the fourth she sat him down for ten minutes and went through the spar again move for move, telling him what he did wrong at every step.

Luckily, he seemed either used to his own failures or just *remarkably* humble, taking her words into account and even writing down some of her notes on a small pad of paper he had tucked in his hoodie.

Her lecture was interrupted by his scroll giving a small beep, the same one that told them his Aura had gotten back over 80% full. She had asked him to try and use it to consciously make his regeneration

stronger, and she had been correct in assuming that when he focused on it, he could indeed amplify its regeneration speed.

She had almost demanded he give her a boost there and then as she spied another glimpse of the potential in his Semblance, but she stopped herself. It would not do to give away her motives so early in the game, not when she still had her target dancing in her palm.

"Ah, damn, I have to go, Cinder, sorry. Team Leader stuff, you know what I mean."

Her thoughts were interrupted as Jaune's scroll went off and he jumped to his feet, grabbing his sword and shield from nearby and packing them up, strapping them to his hip.

"Pardon?" She hadn't meant to ask the question, but the sudden need to leave had surprised her, especially mid-internal monologue about how in her grasp he was already.

Jaune looked sheepish as she walked over to her, rolling his shoulders to try and work out the pain from where she had smacked him in their last spar. It would surely bruise... Or would it, through his Amplified Aura? It might already have healed for all she knew.

"Yeah, there's something my team needs me for, and it's apparently really important. Still, I'd like to thank you for today! Even if you did kinda beat me up, I think I learned a lot. Would you be willing to do this again sometime?"

She nodded, regaining her groove as Jaune stuck his hand out for her to shake. The fool did seem genuinely sorry for having to go so soon, so she grabbed his hand and shook it politely like the woman that was her current persona would.

"Of course, Jaune. We have each other's contacts now, so we can organise another one of these sessions for another day. Don't be worried about offending me either, your team is more important."

Jaune paused at that, however, meeting her eyes with an odd look on his face. He nodded slowly but didn't let go of her hand for some reason, and she felt a spark of... Hope? An odd feeling that she was largely unfamiliar with, but she knew *why* it shot through her.

"Thanks for being so understanding. I... I just want you to know as well, that you don't have to like, keep the mask on around me, alright? And if you want me to do this, you can just ask. You've helped me out, so we're friends now."

Cinder blinked as Jaune activated his Semblance and stared at their hands, the connecting point, with wide eyes. She had gotten a taste of the feeling in the cafeteria a few days before, but this...

Jaune was intentionally putting as much as he could into his Semblance, to make it the most effective it could be... And it felt *intoxicating*. Her Aura felt doubled, or more, and even the Maiden's power that lay within her seemed to *sing* as her soul was reinforced.

A gasp escaped her mouth as the power shot through her, even as it started to plateau and Jaune let go of her hand. Even as he said his goodbyes and left the training room she stood there, staring at her hand, at her Aura.

Her entire body looked aflame, even without her summoning any of Maiden's Flames. Her body felt lighter, but so much stronger, and her Semblance called out to her. Normally she had to superheat items to be able to control their shape or movements, but she could sense almost everything in the room that was heated at all.

It was... *incredible*, but not even the headiest feeling she had ever experienced, the most power she had ever had, could stop her from replaying his last words to her before he left in her head.

' *You don't have to, like, keep the mask on around me, alright?*'

Somehow, he had been able to pick up on the fact that she was faking her personality. That was the only thing she could think of that

would count as a 'mask'. But what did that mean, exactly? Was it just that he knew she was putting her friendliness on? Or did he know about her true reasons for being at Beacon, somehow?

A pressing question and one made no less frustrating by the implications of the latter option. If he knew about her plans, then an important crossroads was approaching, where she would have to value his worth as an Aura Battery vs the Maiden's power.

A decision he would lose. And while she didn't much care for the boy's life, nor anyone's really, she *did* care for his Semblance, and the effort she had already put in to draw him to her side. So when it really came down to it, she found herself hoping that he was oblivious, that he was just slightly more observant than she had expected.

Because the alternative meant that she would have to take care of him, and that was *such a waste* of a potentially good lackey.

## Chapter 3

Jaune was starting to notice something.

Ever since their first training session, Cinder was becoming more and more common to see outside of class, so much so that even RWBY and the rest of JNPR had noticed. He could still remember how red he had gotten when Yang asked what he had 'done to the girl to get her so interested'.

No amount of claiming that he was just getting some training off a new friend had stopped the absolute tease-fest he had received from all angles after that.

Even with the teasing, though, he didn't mind seeing Cinder more often. Not only was she *gorgeous*, but he had even started to 'hang out' with her outside of training, and he had learned that she was rather funny, her dry wit allowing for quality banter... Or at least he was pretty sure it was just banter?

The other thing that he was figuring out was that Cinder was *mean*. In that 'mean-girl' way he had seen on TV, yeah, but also mostly she had what he would generously call a 'cruel streak' if asked about it.

The thing was, *he* was never the recipient of the cruelty. Was it because he had called out her 'mask' and told her that he could tell she was putting it on? Or was this because he had made friends with her?

And while he liked how smart and funny Cinder could be... He felt a little uncomfortable when she would insult other people or be cruel in other ways, so he'd started... Not *manipulating* her into being less cruel, but showing that he appreciated when she wasn't, or when she did good things.

It had started small, and he hadn't even meant to at first. A small boost as a thank you when she had seen he was upset at one of Cardin's teammates (he couldn't remember their name) bullying another student and stepped in before he could.

That was when Cinder had started to do 'good' things when he was nearby. He wasn't dumb, he knew she likely saw it as a way to get more boosts out of him, but... He was genuinely fine with that. If all he had to do was give Cinder a boost here and there to get her to be nicer then he would pay that price any day, especially now that his training had made calling upon his Semblance -almost- second nature.

At the very least he didn't have to sit still and close his eyes while he focused on his Aura anymore, so that was a definite improvement!

So yeah, Cinder was becoming more of a friend every day, and he was glad for it. She still didn't have any interest in hanging out with Ren, Nora, or Pyrrha, but for some reason, they were more than fine with that.

He could understand why they might dislike Cinder, especially with her initial motivation to get close to him being to use him, but he liked to think they were proper friends now. She had seemed distracted and conflicted as of late, but he knew that deep down she was probably better off for having a friend, and he was more than proud to be that friend.

Still, he wondered what was causing her so much stress, but she had been remarkably tight-lipped about anything in her personal life or history so far. That was fine with him, but he was curious.

Ah well, he'd get her eventually.

---

Things were progressing smoothly.

Okay, that was a bit of a simplification. Things were *complicated*, not smooth, but it was still stressful for her. She and Jaune were continuing in their mutually beneficial relationship, and she was starting to feel the permanent results regarding her Aura.

She had tested it with Emerald and Mercury's help, not trusting Neo to stop attacking when her Aura was drained, and had found that it took many more attacks than before to shatter her Aura, which had already been nearing the limit of how far she could train her reserves herself.

But now she had gone even further beyond those limits.

What should have brought her intense glee had instead given her a more solid idea of the decisions she would now have to make regarding her current timeline for her plans. Salem would likely not entertain her putting the Fall of Beacon plan on hold for years while Cinder got Jaune onto her side completely, but she had at least been easily able to convince Roman and Neo to hold off on the Mountain Glenn plan.

It wouldn't do for such an incident, and the increased tension the students would feel after it, to impact her and Jaune's training, and the subsequent Aura boosts he gave her as payment for them. The decision to postpone the Mountain Glenn plan was the first step, and she was going to have to figure out her next steps soon. But for now...

For now, she was 'hanging out' with Jaune, as he referred to it. She had done so a few times in the week or so after their first training, and while she would usually balk at the waste of time such pointless activities as 'walking around vale' and 'getting lunch with a friend' would usually be, they had allowed her to do two major things.

The first; find out what Jaune meant at the end of their first training session. She was more than sure by this point that Jaune was not a threat in the way she had been fearing, which was good. He seemed to have some idea in his head that she had some pressure on her to

act a certain way, and that she was 'putting on a mask' when she did so, something she didn't need to do with him.

It was almost funny how correct he was, in all of the wrong ways. There was intense pressure on her to act a certain way, but it was by no means coming from a parent or guardian as he might think. She would quite literally be arrested, and quite possibly executed by Ozpin and his lapdogs if she was discovered.

Even if her only actions against them so far had been to take half of the Fall Maiden's power, failing to kill the Maiden fully... Cinder growled, shaking her head. She did not like to dwell on failure, least of all her own.

The second thing she had figured out, was that Jaune was a naive, idealistic do-gooder... And that was a good thing, in this situation. Not for everyday life, she was convinced that the world would chew him up and spit him out one day -much like she was doing, actually- but right now it gave her another avenue to Jaune's Semblance.

"Thank you, miss! Wow, you're really pretty!"

Using her Semblance to create a stick of black glass long enough for her to push a kid's ball out from where it was stuck in a tree, she grinned sweetly -almost sickeningly so, at her- and handed the small red ball to the little girl.

"Thank you, child. And it was my pleasure to help."

The girl ran off back to her friends and Cinder used her Semblance to melt down the glass, returning it to its place in its canister, hidden underneath her dress. She turned from the children and saw Jaune looking at her, a grin on his face.

A smug smile came onto her face as she approached him, and he seemed to almost instinctively Amplify her Aura a little. She had quickly noticed that doing 'good' things around Jaune was a quick way to make him more predisposed to giving her boosts.

She had gotten him to the point where he didn't even need to make contact with her now, or as close a proximity that he might as well be making contact. As long as she was within slightly longer than his arm's reach from him, he could Amplify her Aura. The fact that his range was growing was a trait that she was encouraging, the fantasy of long-ranged, constant Amplification drifting in her thoughts.

"That was so cliché, oh my god."

Cinder paused as Jaune's voice pulled her from her mind, and she raised an eyebrow at him, placing a hand on her cocked hip.

"Excuse me?"

Jaune snorted, shaking his head and motioning towards the kids, his Semblance very clearly ending as the glow from his hands faded.

"Getting a kid's ball out from a tree, getting called pretty... I think I've seen, like, seven different movies with that exact scene. You need more original material."

That had been a surprise to her as well, the way that Jaune talked with her. Emerald hung onto every word she said with awe. Mercury showed that he heard her with a grunt and little else. Neo... Said nothing because she couldn't, but usually made it clear that she was only working with Cinder for Roman's sake with some sort of rude gesture.

It was almost... *Nice* to have someone willing to banter back and forth with her. Such a feeling made her uncomfortable to no end so it balanced itself out, but it didn't stop her from feeling all of it. "Well, even if it is a common scene, I am not surprised that it has happened to me. I am one of the most beautiful people alive."

Jaune laughed out loud at that, and she was *this close* to skinning him alive for insulting her when he waved a hand at her. "At least you're aware of it. Sometimes I wondered if your being seductive was an accident or not."

She raises an eyebrow at that, making a show of being smug about him complimenting her when she was smug for an entirely different reason. Physical attraction was a boorish way to wrap someone around her finger, but one that she had used to manipulate people before, and was not afraid to leverage her if it meant securing Jaune's Semblance.

Before she could capitalise on it, however, Jaune pauses and looks over the street. "Say, we've been walking for a while. Wanna get something to eat?"

Cinder hummed as she looked at the cafe... It looked satisfactory at the very least. She didn't even really care *what* they did, as the purpose of this outing was merely to get him more and more under her control.

She nodded, and he smiled, darting over the road when there were no cars, and she followed. Entering the cafe, she was at least grateful for how empty it seemed, with very few customers dotting the tables around the one Jaune led her to. She didn't have much of an opinion about places like this, having never really been to one, but she *did* have an opinion on crowds of people, a decidedly negative one.

They reminded her too much of a much more powerless time.

The other benefit of the cafe being so empty is that their food arrived rather quickly. Jaune had gotten an ungodly large burger and a portion of chips so large she would bet it weighed half of what he did. Her meal was much less extravagant, opting instead for a simple chicken parmigiana and chips, a small serving of salad on the side.

They ate in silence mostly, and she finished her food far faster than he did.

Eventually, it got to the point where both of them had finished, but neither made a move to get up. She was fairly sure that he must just be trying to not throw up from the sheer amount of food he had just

eaten, and her leaving first would be 'rude' which undermined her goal here.

"So, is chicken parmigiana your go-to meal or do you usually get something else?"

"What?"

She hadn't meant for her response to his question to contain so much bite, but she had been thrown off guard by the question and its inanity. Jaune didn't seem put off by her tone, however, and just asked his question again. "Is chicken parmigiana your go-to meal, or do you usually get something else?"

"I don't usually go to cafes. Emerald cooks."

It was true, but she hadn't meant to tell him the truth. She had intended to play into her cover by making up a believable backstory... It was just the suddenness of the question that had thrown her off.

Jaune nodded, his palm on his cheek holding his head up as he let out a small laugh. "Right... Is she any good at it?"

Cinder was still confused as to why he was asking things like this, but she forced herself to keep her goal in mind and answered after a moment to think. Was he trying to use smaller questions to try and find some inconsistency that he could potentially fact-check when they got back to Beacon? And if he did catch her lying about something like this, what else would she lie about?

She couldn't risk getting any extra scrutiny on her or her team. "She is proficient enough at it, having done it for a few years now. Why are you asking about this?"

Jaune looked a little sheepish for a moment, rubbing the back of his neck as he sat up. "Well, I mean, I like to think we're friends, but to

be honest I don't know much about you. I guess I'm just curious, is all."

Cinder felt her shoulders loosen as the tension drained from her. Of course, he wasn't some mastermind trying to unravel her cover. He was just a boy who had probably become interested in the beautiful, powerful girl who was his new friend and wanted to get to know her.

Times like this, where she was blind to the obvious thoughts of simpler people, were the only downsides to being so far removed from any thoughts of romance for her entire life. Usually, she was more than happy for that removal, as it allowed her to focus on gaining power, but it was occasionally inconvenient for her plans when she was trying to predict others.

Putting on a false shy smile, she shrugged, her body language shifting to one that spoke of her supposed uncomfortableness. "Oh, there's nothing really worth talking about."

Jaune's forehead wrinkled at that, but she was sure that it was from disappointment, not from suspicion. "Really, nothing? But you're so skilled and awesome, surely you can at least tell me about your training, if not your hobbies or something."

Cinder frowned, pausing for a moment as she tried to think of a good enough answer to satisfy him, but not give away too much information. "My training was... Intense. My guardian had it planned that I would become a Huntress long before I aspired to it myself, and I was trained since I was young. My sheer level of talent did wonders for my skill level, too, of course."

Jaune hummed, his eyes focused on her as she spoke. He looked at her with admiration but of a whole different tinge to the soul-devouring devotion Emerald showcased, or the respect for her strength that Mercury showed. It was something else altogether, a respect for *her*, something that filled her with a surge of pride.

"I'll say. We're probably around the same age and you can kick me up and down a training field with ease. I did only start training at the start of- Uh, fairly recently, compared to you, I mean."

Cinder felt her interest pique at his clear deflection from his sentence, but didn't press onward, the uncomfortable, almost scared look on Jaune's face telling her clearly that pushing him to tell her about it could jeopardise their 'friendship.'

Jaune coughed into his closed fist and continued, steering to a different topic. Cinder was happy to let him. "But uh, yeah... Do you have any hobbies? I've never seen you in the library or workshop or anything."

Cinder opened her mouth to talk. Of course, she had hobbies, and why wouldn't she? Every sufficiently powerful and respectable person in history had something they could devote their free time to, it was a mark of someone strong to be able to spare time to pursue frivolous entertainment...

And yet, when she tried to list them to him, she froze up, her mind going blank as no answers came to her. She... Didn't have an answer for him. He seemed to realise that after a second, smiling at her softly.

"No, I do not. I've never had the time for it, my focus has always been on my training."

He nodded softly, a small smile on his face as he looked up at the roof for a moment. "Yeah, didn't think so. Y'know... You're kinda like Pyrrha in that regard. Pyrrha is wonderful and tries her best, but she's a *mess* when it comes to social stuff, especially with strangers, and not to be rude, but... Well, you're not exactly a social butterfly either, no matter how friendly your mask can be."

She flinched slightly at the off-hand mention of her cover persona but reminded herself that he had all of the details wrong about why she was using it. He chuckled under his breath, and met her eyes again,

grinning. "Both of you seemed to have had a childhood full of lots of training and nothing else. I'd bet that you have a boatload of pressure on your shoulders to perform excellently at all times as well, don't you? "

She couldn't say that the comparison to the redheaded fighter was a welcome one, even if it was rather accurate how he put it. Cinder's eyebrows furrowed as she attempted to dispute him on that, but the lies died in her throat.

Instead, she clicked her tongue, leaning back in her chair as her arms crossed under her chest and one knee crossed over the other. "Yes, I would say I have a rather large amount of pressure on me to perform. That, as well as my training, leaves little time for hobbies, it seems. Does that answer satisfy you?"

She didn't know why she was telling him this. Didn't know why she was even entertaining this conversation or this outing. She hadn't been lying, there were so many things she could be doing at the moment to further her goal of extracting the rest of the Fall Maiden's powers, and yet she was *here*, with Jaune.

Why?

"Honestly... Not really. Maybe you could try glassblowing?"

She raised her head and met his eyes as he spoke, a confused look on her face. Jaune continued after taking a sip from his glass of water. "Glassblowing. It's kinda like what you do with your semblance, making glass super hot and reshaping it into things, just... Using it to make figurines and art instead of weapons."

"Are you suggesting a hobby to me? I was under the impression people were meant to find their passion themselves."

Jaune outright laughed at her words, shaking his head. "Well, you haven't so far. Plus, I'm the *last* person who would advocate for the 'lone wolf' way of doing anything. Had that drilled out of me during

my first couple of weeks at Beacon. Everyone needs help, that includes me, that includes our classmates, and I'm sure it includes you, too."

She was sure that he could see her scowl at the suggestion that she needed help with anything. She wasn't quite sure why the suggestion was even bothering her so much. She didn't *have* a hobby, didn't need one, and was unlikely to take up glassblowing even with his suggestion.

But Jaune didn't seem to be done, even with her scowl seeming to have scared some of the confidence out of him. "I-I was mainly suggesting glassblowing because I actually have a little bit of knowledge about it that could help you start."

He coughed, turning his head to the side in an attempt to escape her scowl, scratching the back of his neck. "One of my sisters tried it for a week or two and forced me to pitch in to buy the supplies but she got bored after she didn't get her first figure right. I practised a bit and it didn't interest me much either, but I still remember the basics."

He stood up after he finished talking, winking at her and holding out a hand to her, a *stupid, foolish* grin on his face. "C'mon, why don't we give it a shot, at least! If I have to, I'll bribe you with a small boost to make you at least give it a sincere try. Everyone should have a hobby."

She hated the fact that he got a reaction out of her at that, her Aura *singing* for just a moment at the thought of getting another boost, and she groaned. She didn't want to waste any more of her time with this, but if she was getting a boost out of it...

"Ugh, fine then. I accept."

She moves to shake his hand, but he lunges and grabs her wrist instead, throwing some Lien down onto the table and dragging her out of the cafe. Only her surprise stopped her from effortlessly

resisting his pull. He was physically strong, but not enough to outmatch her yet, at least without his Semblance boosting himself.

And speaking of his Aura Amplification...

"Awesome! I knew you'd agree. I actually have some glass that should be good for it already stashed in my dorm, so let's go grab it. Man, this is gonna be fun!"

The joyous feeling of his Semblance activating flooded through her as Jaune dragged her along, dodging civilians as they ran. He eventually did let go of her arm when he seemed sure that she was going to follow him back to Beacon, but with his increased Amplification range that didn't stop him from flooding her Aura the whole way back.

But even more than the elation her Aura was subjected to by his Semblance, there was a small kernel of something that felt even better, something that sprung up when she saw that *goofy* smile on Jaune's face. It was something she hadn't felt before and didn't have a name she could attach to the feeling.

All she knew was that as nice as it felt, it brought along an equal measure of fear and stress as if something was tearing her in half.

---

Cinder wasn't a nice person.

Jaune was aware of that. But, he was fairly certain he was not only figuring out why, but rounding out those sharp edges she had. After their trip to the cafe he had given her some tips about glassblowing on the way home and then handed her the bag full of the lumpy glass nuggets he had bought.

She hadn't seemed *super* enthusiastic, but he had kept his end of their deal and given her a boost, and he knew her well enough by now that her pride wouldn't allow her to back out of her end. She

might complain to him later about him wasting her time, but he knew she would give it an earnest try.

And that's all he wanted. From the way she had spoken of her guardian and her training, and the fact that she had seemingly done nothing else, he could tell even without her saying it outright that her childhood wasn't the healthiest.

Was that an excuse for being a bit mean and rude to people? No. Was it an *explanation*? Yes, it was, at least in his eyes. That was why he wanted to try and get her on a hobby, however. With her at Beacon, she was away from her guardian and their influence, probably. He'd already grown as a person since -illegitimately- getting into Beacon, somewhat letting go of his self-imposed worries about 'living up to the arc name' and focusing on just being the best Jaune Arc he could be... And he hoped she could grow out of the shadow of *her* guardian, too.

Plus, he wanted to pay her back for the progress he was making with his swordplay. With both Pyrrha and Cinder helping him train, two of the strongest classmates in their year by a long shot, he could *feel* how much better he was getting at using Crocea Mors.

Pyrrha's style was fluid and professional, while Cinders was scrappy, and just as mean as she was. With both of them helping, he was starting to form his own way of fighting, one that they couldn't replicate, like he couldn't replicate their agility.

If he couldn't jump around and bounce off the walls at the speed of sound... Then he would *become* a wall. With his improvements in using Crocea Mor's shield and his Semblance, he was starting to become harder to put down for good than the majority of his classmates. He might never be as quick as his friends, or at least not until he had a lot more experience and training, but he could be a shield that the Grimm couldn't break.

He snorted from his position of lying down on his bed in JNPR's dorm room, glad that no one could hear his thoughts right now

because that was super cringy... Ruby would probably think it was a cool line though, with how earnest and comic-book protagonist-y she could be... Maybe he would tell *her* and no one else, to spare himself the teasing.

Hopping up off his bed, he smiled, nodding to Ren as he moved over to the door. "See you, Ren. Almost time for my training with Cinder."

Ren hummed from his spot at his desk as he leaned over it, looking up from his homework. "I see... Did you not have that earlier today?"

Jaune shook his head, the door half-open. "Oh, no, we were just hanging out around Vale while I grabbed some supplies for the upcoming assignment. Extra pancake mix for Nora and the like, you know how it is."

That got a sly smile out of Ren, who closed his eyes as he did a small head motion that Jaune was pretty sure was his version of a chuckle. "Indeed I do. Well, good luck with your training, and with Cinder. A word of advice, though?"

Jaune cocked his head to the side, intrigued. "What's up?"

Ren turned his head and met his eyes, saying something with them that Jaune couldn't figure out but could tell Ren was serious about. "You have been spending a lot of time with Cinder recently, both during your training sessions and your... Outings alongside her. There are... Rumours circulating about the two of you."

He must have seen the flash of worry on Jaune's face at his words because he held up a palm to Jaune. "Good ones, I promise, nothing like the Cardin situation, but... Frustrating for some people either way. Perhaps consider clarifying your and Cinder's relationship to P- to your friends?"

Jaune's face went red as he realised what Ren was saying, and he coughed into his hand, embarrassed. "I mean, Cinder is a friend, and, uh... ahem..."

Ren hummed again, returning his focus to his homework. "It might be easier to figure this out for yourself before trying to explain. I am... Rather well-versed in the complexities of admitting such feelings to the world."

Jaune snorted at that, a smile forming on his face as he exited the room, closing the door behind him. Even knowing Ren couldn't hear him, he spoke to the air. "And here I thought you were oblivious to Nora."

Shaking his head, he started to jog down the hallway towards the training rooms, and he had just turned a corner around halfway there when he felt a flash of heat coming from behind him. Turning, he saw Cinder stomping towards him, her hands and slightly up her forearm glowing bright orange.

" **YOU!**"

He gulped, taking a step back as she got right up in his face, a complicated, almost confused look on it. She *looked* mad... but he couldn't for the life of him feel like he was in any danger of being hurt. Still, she was clearly upset about something, so he cleared his throat and spoke.

"Y-yep, it's me, haha... I-is everything alright, Cinder?"

Cinder outright froze at that, looking at him as if he were an idiot. "Alright?! ALRIGHT?! **NO!** Everything is not alright! Everything is wrong and it's your fault!"

He took a half-step forward to try and comfort her but winced as the heat her Semblance was releasing rose again, keeping him away. "I had everything planned! And now, all of a sudden, I feel like absolute shit, and everything I had prepared for is falling apart in my mind!"

She took a step forward and thrust her finger into his face, causing him to start to sweat under his armour as the superheated air

scorched him slightly, but he activated his Semblance just enough to counteract it with his amplified healing.

"So, you are going to answer me right here, and right now, *Jaune Arc*- "

**" -What the fuck did you do to me?!"**

## Chapter 4

Cinder's footsteps echoed through the empty hallways of the student dorms.

She is 'searching for the Fall Maiden'... Or that's what she had told Emerald and Mercury, for all the grey-themed man cared about her movements. In reality, however, she was already *fairly* certain of where the Fall Maiden was being kept, a sense deep within her pulling her vaguely downwards...

But it wasn't like she could just blitz her way down there this very instant. So instead of searching for the Fall Maiden, her mind was ablaze with troubling thoughts.

She was... Unable to get the sight of Jaune's goofy smile at the cafe out of her mind. Honestly, it was rather annoying, having everything around her start to remind her of some flash of conversation that she had with Jaune or every meal be tinged with the idea of getting his opinion on the food...

And the sight of the statue out front of the dorms through the windows had her wondering if she could replicate it with her glass, her fingers *twitching* slightly as she imagined it.

But she couldn't think of *why on Remnant* she would be so stuck on Jaune. He was just a pawn, a coincidental vessel for a *very* useful Semblance... So why was it that she was now *actually* experiencing some amount of positive emotions towards him?

She's never really *had* good feelings about other people before, or at the very least not ones she can recall at the moment. The only person she's ever felt *truly* good about was herself, but that was because she deserved to feel good about herself for being so amazing, cunning, and tenacious.

The only time she had ever been *truly* happy to see someone else before was... Still locked away deep in her mental vault, to keep the feelings of anguish and betrayal she had felt that day far away from her.

It is thoughts like these, contemplating herself, Jaune, and the odd thoughts that the idiot boy sparked within her, that plagued her mind as she wandered the halls of Beacon. She was starting to feel... Attached to the boy, even outside of his Semblance.

And that was both confusing and dangerous to her plans.

Humming to herself, she turns a corner in the dorms and pauses, a familiar, tedious sight in front of her once again. Team CRDL, with their leader Cardin Winchester at the head, was once again surrounding and picking on a Faunus student.

She was fairly sure that Emerald and Mercury's file on the girl had her as a second year, so Cinder wasn't quite sure why this... 'Velvet' didn't just take the 4 honestly *middling* first-year students out and stop this harassment. But she assumed it was some sort of mental thing, a lack of confidence, perhaps?

Cinder turns away from the pitiful sight, and is about to leave Velvet to her own devices when her body hesitates. As she stands there, the voices of the uncouth boys on the edge of her hearing... A gross feeling in her chest, hitting her like an Ursa.

It would be so easy for Cinder to scare CRDL off from the girl, barely an inconvenience. Her entire train of thought grinds to a halt as the image of Jaune smiling at her flashes through her thoughts again, and she realises what is happening to her.

Cinder Fall, Vessel for the Maiden Powers and Salem's chosen... She was feeling **guilty** about considering not helping Velvet. **She felt guilty?!**

Her entire body shook with rage as confusion swirled within her. What the hell was happening to her? Turning on her heel, it was only a matter of a few meters as she darted towards Winchester specifically, her fist hitting the side of his face and sending him careening down the hallway, with the rest of team CRDL staring at her in shock.

" *Leave now, or burn to a crisp.* "

She *spat* the words at the boys, for some reason feeling upset at them for their actions, which only made her confusion worse. Why should she care about the people here and the way they held themselves?

Why should she *want* to help Velvet?

A flash of *his* smile pinged through her mind again and she felt a warmth in her chest that aggravated her... Confused her. She growled, frustrated by her mind, and the remaining CRDL members seemed to be shocked out of their frozen states by it, scampering off after collecting their now unconscious leader.

Cinder saw Velvet take a half-step towards her and could guess what she was about to say, but right now she couldn't hear it, no longer confident in the reaction it would drag out from her. "Do not thank me, or I'll kill you."

The words died on Velvet's tongue with a 'meep!' as Cinder spoke, the girl darted off -presumably to her dorms- and not even pausing to look back at Cinder. Cinder let out a long, deep breath as she vanished around a corner, the air in front of her visibly distorting from the heat of it.

She could *feel* the rage boiling throughout her, and her Semblance turning 'the fire within' into a real thing. She had felt **guilty** about leaving Velvet to CRDL's clutches. Her! Cinder Fall! She had only ever felt guilty over something once in her life, but had long come to terms with that bastard's death, and that wasn't her fault.

Since then, everything she had done... None of it had phased her. The only thing in her life that was different, the only thing that had changed... It was Jaune.

Her eyes narrowed as she started to stalk through the dorm building's hallways, headed towards the team JNPR dorm room. It was a few hallways over from it that she caught sight of her prey, the shaggy blonde hair like a lighthouse on top of his frustratingly tall frame.

" **YOU!**"

Her feet carried her forward as he jumped from the shock of being yelled at and turned her way. There was an instant when his face lit up at the sight of her, and the warmth inside her *burned* again.

But with her mind as tumultuous as it was, that only spurred her anger even further. Stopping right in front of him, she shoved a finger in his face and stared into his eyes as they shifted into a look of confusion.

That confusion was likely the only thing they shared at this moment, neither of them really knowing what they were doing. That didn't stop her Semblance from activating within her palms, the air around both of them getting uncomfortably hot... For him. She was mostly immune to her own heat.

"Y-yep, it's me, haha... I-is everything alright, Cinder?"

She couldn't stop the scoff that escaped her, too busy mentally laughing hysterically in her mind. Her plan to corrupt Jaune, to make him her personal Aura battery while she laid her claim upon the world.... It had failed, even backfired on her somehow, and that was all he could say?!

"Alright?! ALRIGHT?! **NO!** Everything is not alright! Everything is wrong and it's your fault!"

Even in her anger, she notices him take a half-step towards her, his hand raised as if to reach out to her. She didn't want that, didn't want comfort. She needed to put this issue to rest, and he *would* listen until she was done.

Cranking her Semblance up, she increased the heat around her to such levels that it brought his aura into view as it protected him, but even then he still half-stepped away from her on instinct. Man wasn't made to ignore fire like hers.

"I had everything planned! And now, all of a sudden, I feel like absolute shit, and everything I had prepared for is falling apart in my mind!"

The postponing of Mountain Glenn, which had been done so that she could keep Jaune's -and the whole school's- guard down, and keep him focused on her and their training so he would boost her more often.

The search for the Fall Maiden, incomplete. The slowdown and eventual stop of Dust thefts from around Vale as Adam and the White Fang dropped their alliance when she put their plans on hold again.

And that wasn't even mentioning her plans for the Vytal Festival, lacking as they were. The whole attack was hypothetical at the moment because she had spent so little time working on her schemes, and far too much time working on Jaune and his trust in her...

What would Salem say when she found that Cinder was stalling for her own gain? Sure, she had never given Salem an outright timeline for her plans, but Cinder *had* promised her the Relic of Choice in return for her gaining the ability to steal the Maiden's flames.

Her eyes flicked ahead of her as Jaune's semblance became visible over his own Aura as her heat rose to painful levels for him,

protecting him from the worst of it, and helping to wrangle her attention back into the moment.

So much of her future was up in the air now, and it was *his* fault. She stepped forward once again, seeing his Aura ripple, and poked her finger into his chest, slightly melting the archaic metal breastplate he wore.

"So, you are going to answer me right here, and right now, *Jaune Arc*- "

**" -What the fuck did you do to me?!"**

---

Jaune was very, very confused.

For the life of him, he couldn't remember doing anything to Cinder to get this sort of reaction out of her. Hell, the only thing he had really done to her today that might have been outside of her comfort zone was make her realise she didn't have a hobby, and suggest glassblowing!

"I don't know what you're talking about, Cinder. Just... tell me what's wrong so I can try and help."

He was sweating from the heat she was putting out, but even through the slight haze she had surrounding her, he could see that his words put a look of... Conflict on her face. The heat died down after his words, and he was hoping that meant she had calmed down slightly, enough to talk properly.

That hope was dashed when she reached up and grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt, dragging him behind her as she took them... Somewhere. Somewhere eventually revealed itself to be a small, empty room along the hallways of the dorm building, used as storage for towels and tables and chairs, for those teams that couldn't afford or didn't want to bring/buy their own furniture.

Jaune found himself thrown up against a pile of boxes containing a bunch of disassembled tables, the parts rattling as his Aura absorbed the impact. Jaune... Even with her yelling at him, and throwing him around, Cinder hasn't done anything that would hurt him yet, with the amount of Aura he knows *she knows* he has.

So he doesn't complain about the treatment, and for a moment or two, they merely stare at each other. He can see an almost *feral* look in her eye, something that would usually only peek out during their most intense of spars.

Gulping, he reached forward -content with the decision when the temperature of the room remained the same as it was- and placed a hand on her shoulder. He wasn't using his Semblance, but the way her shoulder sagged as he did so, the fight in her almost looked like it was soothed... He might as well have.

"Please, Cinder. I'm sorry for whatever I have done, and if you explain to me what's going on, I can help you. I hate seeing you like this, and I'm willing to do whatever you need me to do to fix things."

His words -which were meant to be soothing- seemed to have caused her to have an adverse reaction, the feral look in her eyes returning a little more intensely as she started to laugh, her face falling into her hands.

"Would you, really? Would you throw away this, everything you've worked for, everything you've *built* here at Beacon for *me*? Because **that** is what I would need from you, Jaune!"

A fresh new wave of confusion hits him, mingling with the confusion already there, but before he can ask her what is going on, Cinder starts to pace around the room, and his history with his sisters tells him that she needs him to be silent for a while.

He can see that she is thinking hard about something and that it is causing her grief, so he grabs her arm and meets her eyes, nodding slowly. He had a feeling she was about to drop some kind of bomb

on him, but he had heard all genres of "Girl Drama" before and was confident that he could take it.

"I... I have been lying to you. I am not just a student for Haven. I am an agent of a terrible, powerful woman, and my objective at Beacon was to recover an item for her and then destroy both the school and the city of Vale, preferably killing Headmaster Ozpin in the process."

Jaune's entire train of thought crashed and exploded in the station at her words, a cold splash of confusion hitting him. "I'm... sorry? What did you say?"

The look of frustration that appeared on her face at his confusion shut him up quickly, and she started to talk again, even as Jaune's mind went into overdrive at this new information, and how fucking *batshit crazy* it sounded.

So why did he kind of believe her?

"To understand... I have to explain a few things first. The big one being that... Well... Magic exists. Just... Don't ask questions about that now, but actual, real magic exists, and I can prove it. Watch the difference between my Aura... And my Magic."

Jaune watched as Cinder's aura appeared around her, before fading away. His nascent, Semblance-given ability to sense the Aura of those around him told him that she was actively suppressing her Aura now, meaning that whatever happened next wasn't a Semblance.

There was an instant where nothing happened and Jaune almost let out a sigh of relief, hoping to hell and back that this was just some elaborate prank... And then Cinder's hands erupted into flames.

Jaune gulped as the heatless, raging fire lit up the room in sharp shadows that danced across Cinder's face as she stared at her hands, looking almost... Mesmerised by them. Before long, though,

she shook her head lightly and snuffed them out with a flourish of her arms.

Jaune... Had *so many* questions right now. Questions about Magic, questions about how she *got* Magic and more... But somehow the biggest one on his mind after that display was him wondering if Cinder might be a little bit of a pyromaniac. He didn't voice that thought, however, not wanting to materialize a 'yes' for an answer if she decided to give him an example.

"My magic comes from my being something called the "Fall Maiden." I used a creation of my master to steal it from the previous Fall Maiden, but only got half of the power before one of Professor Ozpin and his groups' Agents rescued the woman I stole them from."

Jaune gulped as Cinder met his eyes, a steely glint in them that dashed any hopes he had of this being some elaborate prank. Cinder let out a deep breath, as if readying herself to take a leap, and continued.

"That is why I am at Beacon. To locate the previous Fall Maiden... And kill her, so that I may claim my power in full. I work for terrible people, Jaune. I *am* a terrible person. My plan to locate the Fall Maiden had you, Beacon, and all of Vale in my sights, fated for destruction."

She grabbed him by the shoulders and his eyes went wide as she was suddenly right up in his face. The expression she wore was a crazed one that seemed so far removed from the put-together, elegant image he had of her before that it was a little scary to see her like this.

Not quite as scary at the thought that the girl in front of him was only at Beacon to try and kill almost everyone he knew... But that raised the question in his mind. "Why... Are you telling me this? What did I do to ruin your plans?"

He flinches as Cinder's Semblance-created sword of glass, Midnight, appears at his neck the instant he starts talking. Only for confusion and awe to overpower his fear as the sword shatters in Cinder's grip before she can even threaten him with it, the useless hilt in her clenched hand the only remainder.

"I... I only started to get close to you for your Semblance, you know. I heard that Valkyrie girl blabbing on the Bullhead about the small permanent boost, so I knew about that from the start. All of this... All of it has been to slowly manipulate you to be loyal to me. Or at least, that's how it started."

Even in as confusing and terrifying a scenario as this, Jaune finds a little comfort in that last part. Did that mean that he had gotten through to her and that her sticking around him was more than just manipulation? He felt a little pathetic, really. Was this really the time to feel giddy about Cinder thinking of him in such a way?

"I knew."

There is a burst of confusion and anger on Cinder's face as the words tumble out of Jaune's mouth, but before she can call forth her fire or her swords, Jaune pushes off of the boxes that she had him pinned to and she backs off a step or two as he stands up straight again. "You knew!? Then why did you ever go along with my selfish desires, then, if you knew I was only in it to use you like a tool!?"

Jaune collected himself for a moment, his mind far too active and the undertone of panic running through him too powerful for him to answer without taking a moment to think about the words he wanted to say. "My initial plan was to use you back, for training, and I felt that boosting you now and then was worth it, to learn from you. And I was right. I've improved so much under your and Pyrrha's teaching than I ever could alone in a million years."

Jaune is slightly confused when his words -which fill him with guilt for starting a relationship with someone he now considered a friend with such a mercenary view of her- seemed to calm Cinder down a bit, a

look of... Understanding grew on her face, which just made Jaune feel worse.

"But even knowing that you wanted to use me, I... I have come to see you as a *friend*, Cinder. Someone I care about. After a little while of working together and getting to know you... I stopped boosting your Aura because you'd 'paid' for it with your lessons, I did it because I knew my friend enjoyed the effects of my Semblance, and that felt *good*."

Unfortunately, that seemed to shatter whatever calm Cinder had gotten from his previous statement, her face shifting into something similar to panic. Gulping, Jaune reached out and grabbed her lightly on the shoulder, her hand coming to grab at his wrist like a wild snake, one incapable of stopping him from making contact.

"You... You said that you had plans for Vale and Beacon, but... I haven't heard of anything going wrong, any security breaches or anything like that. Have you... Actually done anything to the School or Vale?"

He sees Cinder *freeze* the instant the words leave his mouth. Jaune can see why. He would admit that he had been remarkably understanding about the whole 'plot to destroy an entire kingdom for Magic powers' thing, but... He cared about Cinder, as prickly as she could be, and wanted to know all of the facts.

If Cinder's plan was nothing but a hypothetical, a wish upon the air with no evil deeds actually backing it yet, then... Then that had options. Because throughout their conversation, he believed that he had figured out why she had said that he had done something to her.

He stays silent for a while as a multitude of emotions, and it's because of his focus on her that he can see when the spark of realisation appears on her face. Her voice is faint when she talks, and he can see that she almost looks surprised at her own words.

"Other than my initial attack on the Fall Maiden, and the reclamation of half of her power... No. I... I haven't done anything since. I've planned things, horribly destructive things, but..."

Jaune nods at that, catching her eyes. She looks like she's searching for something in them, but Jaune's mind is running too quickly for him to focus well right now. Cinder worked for evil people, these people helped her steal half of a *magical girl's* power because that was a thing that was real now, from someone who apparently worked for Headmaster Ozpin and his secret cabal of powerful people, and planned to steal the other half.

As much as he hated to admit it... He could see Cinder attempting that. He knew that she craved power, something he had attributed to a tragic backstory of some kind, and that was why she loved his Semblance so much, but...

He had pinned her wrong from the start. She wasn't the 'hero with a tragic backstory that craves power'. She was the '*Villain* with a tragic backstory that craves power. That was... Troublesome, especially for the way he had started to feel about her after spending so much time with her, but...

But in all of this, there was only one *real* question he had for her.

"You... You said that I had ruined everything, that I did something to you."

He met her eyes and saw -for the first time since he had met her- vulnerability and weakness. This was Cinder at her lowest, confused and frustrated by whatever had caused her to want to reveal all of this to him.

She had to know that he wouldn't approve of her plans, that he wouldn't go along with her just because... Just because he had feelings for her. But he could also tell that she had no intention of hurting him, of *truly* hurting him. So for her to reveal such sensitive information to him... Could it be?

"Cinder... Are you... Having second thoughts about your plan?"

As soon as the words left his mouth he knew he was somewhere in the ballpark of the truth because Cinder *winc*ed, practically flinching, and all of the heat in the room was killed immediately.

Jaune swallowed his nerves as he took a risk, stepping forward and dragging Cinder into a hug. The girl *froze* as he wrapped his arm around her, and he was fairly certain you could hear his heartbeat the next couple of rooms over, but he counted it as a success that she didn't immediately try to stab him.

"I... I won't say that I understand what could have driven you to even *consider* attacking a Kingdom like you said you planned to. But if it's just power that you want, then... Let it come from me. "

He let out a shaky breath as he mentally steeled himself for what he was about to suggest. "If the Power you would gain from the other half of the Fall Maiden doesn't seem worth all of Vale anymore, then I'd say I'm proud of the change you've made. I care about you Cinder... And it would make me so happy to have you stay here, at Beacon... With me."

Cinder was silent for a long while after that, only the small shakes of her body within his arms indicating that she was even still present at all. Was he being too forward? Had he said something wrong? Had he just messed it all up?

It was a little while later that he heard it. Something so quiet, so out of place, so inconsistent with his mental image of Cinder that he hardly believed it was happening. But as his shoulder grew damp where her face pressed into it, it became an undeniable thing, but not one that he would ever tell anyone.

And so he stood there for who-knows-how-long, with Cinder wrapped in his arms and his hoodie growing soggier by the minute as he stroked the back of Cinder's head and wondered just how the fuck they were going to get through this.

But for all that, the situation was complex, likely beyond what he would ever truly understand, he never once doubted they would. As Cinder calmed down, her rare show of emotion ending, he put forward a plan that was just like all of the others he had made since becoming leader of Team JNPR.

Just stupid enough to work.

## Chapter 5

Pyrrha paced back and forth across JNPR's dorm room, a small tinge of worry colouring her impatience and making her feel slightly annoyed.

Where on Remnant was Jaune?

He had been out with Cinder all day, back in their dorms for a little while, and when Pyrrha had finished studying and had gotten back to start getting ready for their training together, Ren had told her that he had gone out again.

While she would never admit it out loud, she was a bit disheartened by how much time Jaune and Cinder had been spending together. Not only was she helping to train him, something that infringed on some of her own time with the boy, but they also spent time together outside of it like they had been today...

Knowing that Jaune was such good friends with her and maybe more... It made Pyrrha feel weird and upset. But more upset at *herself*, because how could she be upset at Jaune or Cinder when she was too much of a coward to just tell him how she felt about him herself?

Pyrrha paused her pacing and plopped down onto her bed, her eyes falling onto Nora and Ren as they played a game on a console Jaune had recently helped them set up after Nora bugged them all to pitch in and buy it with her.

A sigh escaped her and she moved over to the two of them. "Do you mind if I join you for a short while? It looks like Jaune is going to be late, and I don't want to stand up the whole time I have to wait for him."

Nora and Ren exchanged glances at that but quickly passed her a controller, and soon enough Pyrrha was playing some... First-Person Shooter she had never really heard of before that had cool glowing aliens as the bad guys. That put it a step apart from the more mainstream games that all featured the Grimm, in varying levels of quality and graphical fidelity.

Playing the game with Nora and Ren certainly helped while away the time while she waited for Jaune, but she still perked up the instant the door to their dorm room opened, a smile forming on her face, only to freeze as she realised Jaune wasn't alone.

She had been expecting to see Jaune happy and relaxed from his outing, ready for their training together... Instead, he looked stressed and determined, supporting Cinder as she walked in what seemed like a daze, her eyes puffy and a tired look on her face.

"Jaune?! What happened? Is everything alright?"

She was on her feet and helping carry Cinder to the closest bed - Jaune's, she noted- before she could stop herself. As much as a part of her didn't like Cinder, for the obstacle that she represented, if she was important to Jaune then she was important to Pyrrha.

As soon as Cinder touched the covers of Jaune's bed, Pyrrha saw her fall asleep, seemingly having... Cried herself to exhaustion, of all things. That wasn't something she would expect from Cinder of all people, but she would admit not knowing the girl quite as well as she could have.

To be honest, none of them had put any effort into getting to know her, not even after Jaune had started hanging out with her more and more.

"I'm okay, Pyr. But... I have an absolute doozy of a story to drop on you guys. Would you mind turning the game off and letting me explain for a second?"

Before Nora could even say anything -although she knew Nora would probably have said yes to any request Jaune gave- Pyrrha had reached out with Polarity and pressed the power button to the console, her eyes never leaving Jaune, who was sitting on his bed, a hand resting on Cinder's shoulder.

The sight of them like that... It didn't feel great, but she wasn't petty enough to mention it, especially not when Jaune had sounded so serious about the thing he needed to talk to them about.

Ren let out a small laugh as Nora pouted, mumbling something about 'losing the save' but she focused up quickly. Jaune smiled at them, and they returned it, interested in what he was about to tell them.

"So... It's like this..."

What followed was... Enlightening, to say the least. Outlandish, astounding, and unbelievable were other words she might have considered using, but... But this was *Jaune* telling her about it, with one of the most serious looks on his face she had ever seen, even eclipsing the look on his face when he had told her about his transcripts.

As he finished his explanation of who Cinder truly was, why she was at Beacon, and the fact that *Magic* apparently existed... Pyrrha couldn't help but find that she believed him. And while the things he had told them were mind-boggling in their own right, what came next was even more so.

"And there you have it. I wanted you to know because you are my teammates and my friends. I trust you all with my life when we fight Grimm, so I can trust you with this, too."

Pyrrha took her eyes off Jaune's serious expression to check on how Ren and Nora were taking the news... And wasn't surprised. Ren seemed calmer than she or Nora was, but she could see the way his

hands tensed and untensed periodically, a sign of stress people who weren't his close friends wouldn't notice.

Nora was nodding, a finger tapping on her chin as her tongue stuck out slightly. "So, Jaune-Jaune... You mean to tell us that you somehow accidentally tamed a potential terrorist with your Semblance."

Jaune flinched and his eyes darted down to Cinder, who was luckily still asleep, and sighed with relief. Then he started to laugh softly, and Pyrrha and Ren joined in as they all giggled about the sheer absurd the situation seemed when Nora put it like that.

"I'd like to say that it was more my winning personality, but yeah, that about sums it up. Don't let Cinder hear you say that, though, or we'll both cop it."

He snorted after that and rubbed Cinder's shoulder lightly, causing the girl to mumble softly in her sleep, a small amount of smoke coming from Jaune's bedsheets. A quick pat down put out the fire Cinder had unconsciously set, but it was still a bit frightening.

But with his explanation done, and with all three of them confirming they understood the situation... Now it was time for the big question. Neither Ren nor Nora seemed to want to be the one to ask it, so she stepped up.

"So then, Jaune... What is your plan now? What are you going to do? It's clear you don't plan on turning her in."

A look of panic on Jaune's face at the thought of just turning Cinder both appeared -and faded- quickly, changing into the goofy, weirdly confident smile Jaune sometimes got that made her feel like everything was going to be okay.

"I'm going to try and make everything right, and make it so that Ozpin and his group have no reason to try and kill Cinder anymore. But to do that..."

She was surprised to see Jaune bow his head towards them as he held his hands out in front of him, palms together in a prayer position. "I'm going to need your help, you guys. Can I count on you? We might get in a lot of trouble here... And I mean 'could be expelled from Beacon by the end of it' levels of trouble."

Pyrrha felt a momentary spark of fear at the idea of being expelled but put it aside. Jaune had already given her so much, even if he didn't know it. Because of him, and his treating her just like anyone else when even people like Weiss were fawning over her... She had made friendships that she was sure would last the rest of her life.

"I'll help you, Jaune. Tell us your plan."

The grateful smile on Jaune's face as Nora, Ren, and her all accept his request for them to help him puts a smile on her own face. While a part of her is saddened by how clear Jaune's true feelings for Cinder are in the way he is so desperate to protect her, as his partner, friend, and someone who cared about him... She would do *anything* to see Jaune happy.

"Okay, it is pretty crazy -I know- and it requires us to break so many rules it's not funny, but here it is..."

And if Cinder *truly* made him happy? Then it was up to all of them to protect her as well.

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The cool night air was only slightly blunted by his Aura, and it made Jaune wish for a Semblance like Cinder's, which she was using to warm herself up in front of him as they walked.

The grounds around Beacon Tower -including the magnificent stone statue in the middle of the courtyard- had a much more sinister feel to them in the darkness of night, the only light around them being a couple of dilapidated streetlights, and the reflection of the moon.

Jaune glanced behind him to double-check that Pyrrha, Ren, and Nora were following him without issue, and got grins and thumbs up from them all. He turned back to face Cinder just in time for a branch of a tree Cinder had just passed to *whip* back and smack him in the face.

It was almost nostalgic to the Emerald Forest, but this time he had his Aura unlocked, causing the branch to snap with a small crack. Everyone paused as it did, but after a minute or two of no one calling out to them or catching them outright, they continued moving.

Eventually, they ran into a small patrol of Atlas' robot soldiers, which Cinder led them around with... Understandable skill, knowing what he did about her being a former terrorist who was part of a group that had planned to strike Vale and Beacon down.

But really... So had Blake, right? Kinda? So really, what was the issue with Cinder? With a stupid grin on his face, the group continued past the Atlas robots, the others not knowing the brilliant logic Jaune employed.

As they reached the front door, Pyrrha waved her hand, and Jaune saw the cameras in front of the main doors to Beacon get stuck in a position where they could sneak in without getting seen.

A quick, panic-fueled jog later, and Cinder, Jaune, and the others were inside the main hall. "You still not picking anything up, Cinder?"

Cinder looked back as she whispered to her, shaking her head. "It is still just... Down. Boost me again. The pull between the halves of the Fall Maiden's power gets clearer when you do."

Jaune nodded, reaching out with his Semblance and firing up her Aura, paying special focus to the weird, fire-like energy he could feel within her soul. He had been entranced and confused upon seeing it the first time in the Cafeteria, but now that he knew what it was, he could see the difference between the Magic power and Cinder's Aura fairly clearly, even if boosting one seemed to boost both.

Did that mean Aura was just like... A weaker, somehow diluted form of magic? Or was it just because the Fall Maiden's power sat *inside* a person's Aura that it got boosted when he amplified her Aura?

Those were questions for someone far smarter than he was.

Cinder grinned as his Semblance lit her up, and her eyes were drawn downwards. "Yes, it is definitely below us somewhere, and a ways in the direction of the courtyard, just underground."

Jaune nodded, waving the others forward as they started moving towards the elevator. Only to suddenly freeze in place and then hide behind the reception desk as footsteps echoed through the hall, someone mumbling as they walked.

Jaune felt Ren's Semblance fall into place over them all -useful in this instance more for the fact that it sapped all colour from them, rather than the way it muffled their emotions- and peeked the top of his head out to see who it was... And almost sighed in relief as he saw Professor Port strolling down the hallway, a notebook in hand.

*" Hmm, how to make sure that the farmer's daughter remains relevant to the story, while also keeping the action scene, and keeping it relatively concise... Or maybe I do away with the 'Farmer's Daughter' plot at all? Students these days seem grossed out by such scenes, no matter how much the lads enjoy those plot points..."*

As Professor Port passed them, leaving them all with far too much knowledge about his apparent hobby of story writing, they once again dashed for the elevator, Pyrrha saving their butts again as she disabled the camera.

Ren hummed, taking a look at the panel and reading the legend on which floor each of the buttons corresponded. "So, none of these buttons takes us down, what do you think we should do?"

Jaune looked at Cinder, who shrugged her shoulders, a contemplative look on her face. Before he could throw out a

suggestion, however, Pyrrha spoke up, her eyes closed and one hand against the wall of the elevator.

"I can definitely feel that there is an elevator shaft going down from the metal it uses, let me see if I can... Ah! There!"

Jaune saw a small panel just above Pyrrha's head glow with black light and press into the wall slightly and let out a sigh of relief as the elevator rumbled to life, heading downward. While he would have appreciated a more obvious button, it wasn't like Ozpin was going to label his secret bunker under the school with a button that said "Super Secret Vault - Do Not Enter" or something silly like that.

The elevator ride is longer than any of them expected it to be, but eventually, it comes to an end, and the doors open slowly. He hears Nora let out a gasp of shock behind him as the bunker comes into view, and Jaune has to agree that it is impressive.

With a roof so high it felt impossible for it to be underground, and lamps on the pillars illuminating the cavernous space in a creepy green, Jaune couldn't help but be in awe of the area that had just been *hidden* under their feet their whole time at Beacon.

Giving Cinder another boost on instinct, the girl smiles at him and they all press forward into the bunker. "We are now on even ground with the other half of the Fall Maiden's power... And she is close, now."

Jaune nods in acknowledgement, taking care to stand next to Cinder and place a hand on her shoulder while he continues to amplify her Aura. He knows that with everything she had planned before her change of heart, this was going to be a conflicting and confusing event for her.

But he had faith in her. He *trusted* her about all of this and knew she was sincere. And while part of that was surely because he was a lovesick fool, the rest was because he had now seen her at her lowest, and believed in her nonetheless.

They walk and walk and walk some more, for far longer than he had expected to. It was amazing just how large an area there was under Beacon. But eventually, they stop walking... As they have arrived at the Fall Maiden.

Jaune gulps as he looks at the intimidating machine that Ozpin and his group have her in. It looks like a mix between a stasis pod from a science fiction movie and a cloning machine... Also from a science fiction movie.

The Fall Maiden was in the pod on the left, with an empty one on the right. He didn't know what this machine's true purpose was, but it was clear that it was helping to keep the Fall Maiden alive somehow.

And they were about to break it.

Glancing back, he saw Nora staring at him, an excited grin on her face as she held Magnihild at the ready. Stepping aside with a small laugh, he motioned towards the machine. "Alright, Nora... Get her out of there for us, please and thank you."

Nora gave him a salute before darting forward, her Hammer firing and *slamming* into the reinforced latch on the machine with a '**TING!**' sound that echoed throughout the bunker, and caused Jaune -who was the closest to her- to wince slightly.

As the door fell open safely, guided to the ground by Pyrrha's Semblance, Jaune dashed forward and caught the Fall Maiden before she could fall over, immediately Amplifying her Aura to the absolute maximum he could.

Closing his eyes for a moment, he could feel the part of the Fall Maiden's power that sat within the woman. Opening them again, he stuck his hand out towards Cinder, pausing as he saw the conflict on her face.

"Cinder, is everything alright?"

He hates the way that she *flinches* at his question, but it does its job of bringing her back into the moment, out of her own head and whatever memories she was replaying. Her eyes refocused on him after a moment, and she started to stick out her hand, only to hesitate slightly.

"This... This goes against *so much* of what I've been told, and what I've *felt* about the world as I grew up... But I trust you, Jaune. You'll make sure I don't die, and if you don't, I'll kill you myself."

Jaune smiles at her and pushes his hand out a little further, and she returns the smile as she grabs his hand with hers. For an instant, with his Aura pushing into both Cinder and the other woman, he can feel *both* halves of the Fall Maiden's power...

And then his vision goes white.

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Everything is a stark, blank white... Until it isn't.

Cinder opens her eyes and looks down at herself as her legs bend slightly, feeling as if she has just fallen into place... Somewhere. Glancing around she saw nothing but a white void around her -with something invisible but solid under her feet- barring two things.

The first was a glowing ball of golden energy in front of her that she instinctively knew was Jaune. Shooting from the ball was a tendril of light that entered her chest, likely some visual representation of the way he amplified her soul.

And the second...

**" YOU! What are you doing here?!"**

As the woman she had stolen half of the Fall Maiden's power from speaks, Cinder can *feel* the fear towards her that seeps from Amber's soul as she recognises her. Wait... Had she known the woman's name before now? She couldn't remember, truly.

Cinder took a step forward towards Amber, and the woman took a panicked step back, causing Cinder to stop in place as well. She can see another tendril of light leaving the Orb-that-is-Jaune and entering Amber's chest as well, seemingly tethering Cinder and Amber together in this place.

For some reason, she was *absolutely* certain that this place was some kind of a 'soul space' that existed during a normal handover between Maidens, and Jaune was somehow forcing the interaction by acting as a bridge between their souls.

**" Hello, Amber."**

The woman flinches as Cinder says her name, and Cinder raises her hands up to try and show non-aggression. Instinctively, she puts her *soul* behind the words she speaks next, allowing her feelings to reach Amber, much like Amber's fear had reached her.

**" I am sorry, Amber. For attacking you, I mean. All of my life I had been *weak* , so I was trying to... No, no. My apologies, Amber. I won't make excuses and try to justify myself, not to you of all people."**

There is a small pulse of energy from the Orb-that-is-Jaune and Cinder can feel approval from him for cutting herself off. A small smile forms on her face as she looks at the Orb-that-is-Jaune, and takes a deep breath.

**" The real reason I attacked you was because I wanted your power, and Salem had given me a way to get it. There is no greater or lesser reason for it."**

Another pulse of energy from Jaune sends through a feeling of confusion about who Salem is, and Cinder mentally kicks herself for never getting around to telling him about her. No matter, if everything goes according to Jaune's plan, then he will learn of her eventually.

**" I will explain later, Jaune. I promise."**

A sense of acceptance shoots through her and she smiles, her soul-body warming at the feeling of having someone so readily, so openly trusting and caring for her. She shakes her head, however, refocusing back on the task at hand.

**" So-so what?! You're sorry, but you're still here, aren't you?! Come to take the rest of the power, to kill me completely?! Was crippling my soul and cursing me to a slow, comatose death not enough?!"**

Cinder winces, but does not argue against Amber about what she had done to her as the fear and anger Amber is feeling rolls over her. Jaune knew all she had done, and there was little to nothing worth hiding from him anymore if she was already this deep into his plan, this *hopeful* in his plan.

**" Amber... I am not here to reclaim the other half of the power... I am here to return not only the Fall Maiden's power but your health alongside it."**

She can see that the sincerity she attempted to lace through her words struck true as Amber's face fell into one of shock. But even with that, Amber's fear and distrust is apparent. **" I don't believe you! You're trying to trick me! If you're so desperate for power, why would you ever give it back?!"**

Cinder glances at the Orb-that-is-Jaune and smiles, taking a step forward and placing a hand on the orb, feeling the joy that seeps from it enter her at the action. **" I have grown, I think, and become attached to someone my having the power would keep me from. While that is maybe not as selfless a reason as you were hoping..."**

**" I know that you can believe it BECAUSE my reasoning is selfish. With him at my side, mine forever... I already have all of the power, and everything else, I've ever wanted."**

There is a look on Amber's face that tells Cinder that her true feelings are being broadcast correctly to her, the look of fear subsiding slightly. Amber didn't back away as Cinder took another step towards her, either, which Cinder took as a good sign.

There is a moment of hesitation on both of their parts as she raises a hand for Amber to take. A moment where both of them lock eyes and a million words are said not by their mouths, but by their souls.

And then Amber takes the final step forward, standing right in front of Cinder. **" I... I have been able to *feel* myself slipping away, ever since you attacked me. Inching closer and closer to death. I *hated* you for it."**

Cinder held her gaze and didn't flinch. This was the truth, the weight of her choice to attack Amber for her power, the terror she caused this woman. Amber's hand raised slowly, not grabbing Cinder's just yet, but hovering close by.

**" You seem to sincerely want to make things right by returning my power. I can feel it in this place, how badly you want Jaune's plan to work, to stay with him. So... I accept you, Cinder. Let us proceed."**

As Amber's hand grabs onto Cinder's, the Orb-that-is-Jaune floats into place over the top of them where they are connected. There is silence for a moment... And then it is as if a floodgate is opened.

Orange light *billows* around Cinder and is funnelled through the Orb-that-is-Jaune and into Amber... And all three of their Souls are *screaming* as they -once again- tamper with the ancient magical power in ways never intended.

It was not supposed to be possible for someone to steal a part of the Maiden's Power, and likewise, it was not supposed to be possible for such a rift to be mended... And yet here it was, happening within them.

As the last of the fire exits her body, Cinder's vision fades back to the bunker under beacon, the soul space she had been in no longer capable... As Cinder was no longer the vessel for any amount of the Fall Maiden's power.

Drained of the magic power completely, she fell to her knees, her consciousness fading as she hit the floor. She could feel Jaune immediately start to use his Semblance on her again, but as an alarm started to sound out around them, the final thing she felt was a sharp pain stabbing out of her back.

As she fell unconscious even while the Grimm within her started to attempt to tear her apart... She put her faith in Jaune. She never thought she would have anyone in her life, especially not one she cared so deeply for, trusted so deeply.

He would be proud of her for what she did today, and he would praise her with that goofy smile that sent her heart racing. She just hoped -more than she had ever allowed herself to hope before- that by the end of all of this...

That she would still be alive to see it.

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The worst had come to pass.

Ozpin's breath was ragged as he covered his hands in an opaque, green aura, practically *ripping* the doors of the elevator open with the strength of a soul he had spent a millennium mastering.

As he stepped onto the elevator and slammed the end of The Long Memory into the secret button that led to the Vault under beacon, Glynda, James, and Qrow barely had time to catch up to him and enter the elevator before it started to descend.

"Oz, what the fuck is going on?"

Ozpin glanced at Qrow, who was looking so shocked by his behaviour that the man wasn't even drinking. "The worst, Qrow. The proximity alarm has been triggered around Amber's pod. Someone just broke into it."

With that dire news imparted, he glanced over to Glynda, not even really hearing Qrow scream 'WHAT?!' as he focused on the woman's tablet as she flipped through the various cameras in the area. "Give me some good news, Glynda."

The woman shook her head, frowning as she finished looking at all of the above-ground camera feeds for the last hour. "Nothing, sir, I've got nothing on the ground floor, could they have burrowed in... Brothers above! Ozpin! Look at this!"

She tried to show him something but they were interrupted by the elevator reaching the final floor, the small, almost polite 'ding!' seeming out of place with how the occupants *burst* from the elevator at top speed, heading towards Amber's pod.

"Remember, my friends. If this is Amber's assailant, which is likely, then we may be about to face a full-powered Maiden who is loyal to - and likely trained in regards to magic by- Salem herself. I will do my best to protect you from her Magic, but as you know..."

James grunted at his words, glancing at the other two who both seemed to understand the danger they were about to face. "Your power is diminished after so much time, while this new Maiden's will be complete. We understand, old friend."

Ozpin nodded sharply, glad that his chosen few were both aware of the danger they ran towards and courageous that they ran towards it nonetheless. There is silence among them as they prepare for battle...

Only to be shocked at what they find.

The first thing that Ozpin's eyes land on is Amber, who is; 1. Alive, and 2. Kneeling in front of a group of people who seem to be one of their first-year teams, JNPR. The second thing his eyes land on is the woman that the leader of JNPR, Jaune Arc, is healing with all his might as black limbs stab out from various cuts in her back.

The sound they made sprinting there alerted the kids to their arrival, and Pyrrha Nikos, Lie Ren, and Nora Valkyrie all turned and faced them, looking terrified to have been caught. Ozpin doesn't focus on them, however, and instead kneels next to Jaune as he heals... Cinder Fall, the transfer student, as the Grimm inside her goes wild.

"So, this is Amber's assailant... Cinder Fall. It seems you have infiltrated my school as well."

He sees Jaune Arc flinch at his voice without turning to face him, and on a second look, he sees that Cinder is unconscious as... A Grimm of some kind tries to attack her from within. While that opened many different potential issues in the future, he made sure to take note of the fact Salem had designed something like it... There were more immediately pressing issues at hand.

"Yes, Ozpin sir. I... Cinder did attack Amber, I won't lie about that. But please, I need to focus right now. I have to save her, sir. She trusted me to save her but I don't know if giving her my Aura is going to be enough to stop the Grimm. Please, help me in any way you can with your Magic, sir. I beg of you."

Ozpin scoffs, even as a part of his ancient self resonates with the words the young man speaks, The Long Memory clicking against the ground as he approaches Jaune and Cinder. It is curious about how they know about Magic... But if they are down here alongside Cinder then it is likely they know most of the truth.

"And why should I *let* you save her, let alone *help* you do so, Mr Arc? She is an enemy of Humanity, and the woman who attacked a precious student of mine."

" *Because I want you too.*"

Ozpin's head whips to Amber, his eyes meeting hers as *both* of them glow with magical power he long since recognised. To see her awake again, not only alive but seemingly restored to both full health and harbouring the complete power of the Fall Maiden...

And she wished for Cinder to be saved.

Ozpin had denied her much during the time she was the Fall Maiden... But the sheer *certainty* in her voice shook him enough that he didn't feel like he could deny her this.

He places The Long Memory down on the floor slowly and kneels on the other side of Cinder from where Jaune is sitting. He can vaguely hear Glynda, James, and Qrow interrogating the rest of team JNPR behind him, but he allows them to fall from his focus, instead looking at the face of the boy in front of him.

Pure focus, dedicating his entire soul to pouring his Semblance into Miss Fall it seemed. Or perhaps it was just into using his Semblance in general, as even *he* felt empowered by the young man's Semblance in such close proximity.

"Allow your hands to leave her back, young man. I shall extract the Grimm."

He knew from Glynda's reports -and also the present circumstances- that the boy had improved enough that he didn't *need* to be touching someone to amplify their aura, so he knew it was a personal thing for Jaune to have been laying his hands on Cinder.

A part of him twinged in recognition and understanding at the look on Jaune Arc's face as he held his hands over where he could sense the Grimm residing within her.

It is... Remarkably easy for him to weave his magic through Cinder - likely since his power was *also* being amplified by Arc- and *drag* the

Grimm parasite -for that is all the palm-sized monster that had resided in her could be- out of one of the many holes it had stabbed open in her chest, the flesh closing up quickly under the restorative effects of Jaune Arc's Semblance.

With it being outside of her body, the Grimm parasite that was encased in Ozpin's Magic died quickly, thrashing and screeching and making a horrible racket before eventually fading into dust, as all Grimm should.

Ozpin noted in fascination that a tattoo that had been visible through the holes in the back of Miss Fall's dress vanished the instant the Grimm parasite was completely evaporated... He made sure to take note of the symbol it had created and keep an eye out for it.

He sees Jaune Arc slump in both exhaustion and relief as the Grimm dies, and Cinder remains breathing, steadily, under his care... And so Ozpin gets to his feet and turns his back on them, focusing on Amber.

But before he can say anything, Amber raises a hand at him, a smile on her face as she looks at Jaune Arc and Cinder Fall. "Perhaps we should allow her to rest and reawaken before we do the explanation. Would be trouble to have to do it over and over again, right?"

Ozpin turns back to see Jaune Arc hugging Cinder Fall to his chest and smiling as he cries softly, with Pyrrha Nikos, Lie Ren, and Nora Valkyrie hugging their leader from behind. He looks between them and Amber, and wonders for a moment if they even realise what they have done for humanity today.

Now it was time to see what they were to do about this whole fiasco... Life had been much simpler when Team RWBY were the only problem children he, Glynda, and the rest of Beacon's staff had to deal with...

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"So... That's it. The whole story. Uh... Thank you for listening."

Jaune sat back down in his chair next to Cinder as his awkward finale to explaining everything that happened to Ozpin and his group hit everyone, allowing them the chance to think over the story in full.

As Jaune glanced around the group of scary, powerful adults that stood on the other side of Ozpin's desk... He found himself more hopeful than he had expected to be from their expressions.

He had no way of telling what Ozpin was thinking -the man was as unreadable as a book in a foreign language to him- but he *had* helped save Cinder down in the bunker under the school, so that was probably a good sign.

The scruffy-looking guy named Qrow wasn't there, instead talking to Ruby and Yang -who were apparently his nieces, that was cool- Professor Goodwitch and General Ironwood both had incredibly scary-looking thinking faces on, but other than that they didn't seem too enraged or murder-y respectively, which was *definitely* a good sign!

Hilariously enough, Amber seems to be the one who is the most at ease in the room. He had gotten... Vague snippets and impressions from Cinder and Amber's talk within wherever their consciousnesses had gone when he connected them, but only vague ones.

"Mr Arc. I am sorry to make you repeat yourself, but..."

Jaune gulped but nodded to Ozpin either way. He knew it was a pretty crazy story, and that it *sounded* pretty far-fetched to anyone that hadn't been there for the whole thing... But he *needed* to make them understand if the last stage of his plan to save Cinder was going to work.

"It's fine. So, while she *did* attack Amber for her power, and plot to do a bunch of other stuff to get the other half of it... She hasn't *actually* done anything since attacking Amber, other than *maybe* encourage a couple of Dust robberies, but realistically, Torchwick would probably

have done those anyway. And silver lining, you found Ruby because of one of those, y'know?"

Jaune internally winced as his joke didn't land whatsoever, but perhaps now wasn't the best time to try and insert humour into the situation. Before he could put his foot any further into his mouth, however, Amber spoke up.

"I believe you, Jaune."

Everyone's eyes turn to Amber, but she doesn't falter underneath the stares of Ozpin and the rest of the group. "When Jaune connected Cinder and I... It was similar to when my predecessor handed the power off to me, Ozpin. I was back in the soul space... and I could *feel* how she felt, much like she could feel how I felt."

She motioned towards Cinder, a smile on her face. "That's why I trusted her and made the connection that returned the stolen parts of the Maiden's power to me. She could have just as easily used that connection to steal my half. I was far too weak by then to resist her."

Jaune saw Cinder bob her head slightly. In any other circumstance, it would be amusing to see Cinder so quiet and visually nervous, something so far removed from the confidence she usually outwardly showed... But right now it was a nerve-wracking thing, to know that her continued living was in the hands of Ozpin and his group.

Reaching over, he grabbed her hand and interlocked their fingers, squeezing it gently as he smiled at her far more confident than he felt. But as he did so, it seemed that the movement hadn't slipped past Ozpin, as the man let out a sigh.

"Jaune Arc... And Cinder Fall. While I am obviously distrustful of you, Amber's testimony -as well as the proof of her having the entirety of the Fall Maiden's power- *does* help me believe what you are saying about Miss Fall's... Change of heart."

Jaune felt the small spark of hope in his chest grow to a blaze at Ozpin's words, even as the rest of the people in the room seemed to vary from disapproving to contemplative. Cinder squeezed his hand again, and he could *feel* her excitement in the gesture.

"I once told your friend that I have made more mistakes than any man, woman, or child on this planet... And that is true. I can understand loving a woman you fully know has committed, and still harbours some amount within themselves, evil... And I can also understand that this instance has turned out... Far better than my own did."

Jaune blushes at the phrasing Ozpin uses, and is slightly confused by the statement in general, but ignores his confusion as he tries to read between the lines of what the man was saying because it almost sounded like Ozpin was...

"I can agree that other than the initial attack on Amber... Miss Fall has done nothing while enrolled at Beacon that would not fall under imagination and fantasy, as no acts have been committed."

Jaune's heart leapt into his throat and Cinder's grip on his hand tightened so much he almost had to call upon his Semblance to stop his bones from creaking. "Sir, do you mean-"

"And because Miss Fall is a legitimately enrolled student in Beacon, the verdict falls to me and me alone. Miss Fall?"

Cinder, for the first time during the whole meeting, met Ozpin's eyes and spoke. "Yes, Ozpin?"

The older man gave them both a smile that looked sad, contemplative, nostalgic, worried, and hopeful all at once as he nodded slowly. "You have a test on Friday, I believe. Perhaps you should spend your time between now and then studying with your team, instead of plotting my downfall."

Jaune is on his feet in an instant, a cheer escaping him as Ozpin sits back, talking softly to General Ironwood and Professor Goodwitch. He reached down and hugged Cinder around the waist as he *hauled* her off of the chair, hugging her tightly and shaking her back and forth. "Cinder! We did it!"

The girl is laughing at him, but he feels it is different than all of the other times she'd laughed at him before. Something is different about her, and it's not just the Maiden's power being gone. He meets her eyes as she laughs at his goofy smile, and doesn't even remember moving.

Her lips tasted vaguely of coffee. Which he felt fit her to a tee, as hot and addicting as she was to him. His eyes were shut as he kissed Cinder, but he could *feel* her kiss him back a moment later.

They separated a moment later and were panting as they looked into each other's eyes... Only remembering where they were as Ozpin coughed into his fist behind them. "Yes yes, you are excited. But there are still matters for us to handle, so... Please do that elsewhere."

Jaune's face went bright red while Cinder outright laughed at Ozpin's words. But they both sprinted to the elevator and pressed the button for the bottom floor anyway, getting a goodbye wave from Amber while the others focused more on talking to each other.

They ride the elevator down, Cinder grabbing at his hand and interlocking their fingers, and they exit to see a concerned-looking Team JNPR. Silence reigns for a moment as Pyrrha, Ren, and Nora just stare at them...

Then Jaune grinned at them and was practically *tackled* into a hug by his team as cheers echoed around the hall, his own joining them a moment later. As he gets pinned to the floor by his teammates hugging him, he sees Cinder standing above them, an amused smirk on her face as she shakes her head.

And Jaune can only grin even wider, holding out a hand to invite her to the hug pile. And while she probably only intended to grab his hand and hold it -something that he would honestly also love- she had probably expected him to *drag* her into the pile as he wrapped his arms around her.

For all she thought him silly, however, rolling her eyes at him and mumbling something that was probably calling him an idiot... She never made any move to get up from where he held her.

And that was all the proof he needed.

Eventually, he let go of Cinder and his team let go of him, and he got to his feet, so massive a smile across his face that he wondered if it would ever go away. "Let's head back to our dorm, you guys, and I'll explain when we get there. You should call your guys there too, Cinder."

"Good idea," she nodded, already pulling out her Scroll as she watched Nora charge ahead towards the Dorm room, dragging Ren along behind her, "Let's go, then."

Jaune all too happily held his hand out for Cinder to take, not noticing the look of unease it put on Pyrrha's face as she schooled her expression before he saw it... But not before Cinder did, a look of realisation coming onto her own.

That would need to be addressed, but not right now. Right now, she just wanted to rest alongside the boy she had somehow come to love and inform Emerald and Mercury about their new circumstances.

*Then* she could figure out all of the drama later. If there *needed* to be drama, that is.

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Cinder looked around JNPR's dorm room, a feeling of contentment within her.

Yes, she was worried about what her betrayal would mean in regards to Salem, worried about what the Grimm queen would try now that Cinder's plan had... **Fall** en through. But if Cinder's plan was what Salem had been banking on to start all of the panic and confusion she needed, then *could* she even do anything yet?

As hopeful as she was starting to feel about life nowadays, she couldn't help but worry that her defection might have only won humanity some time to breathe.

Shaking her head, she turned to look at Jaune as he spoke with the Silver-Eyed girl, Ruby, on the other side of the room as music and terrible teenage singing echoed around her. Now that it had been a week or so since Ozpin had officially decided that Cinder, Emerald, and Mercury could stay at Beacon and everyone had settled in properly, Jaune had thrown them a party.

She sat on the side of it all, taking sips from her drink. While she would never call herself *shy* or *antisocial*, she had a healthy amount of introversion to large groups of people, something she would attribute to her time spent at the Glass Unicorn, may it burn to ash again and again.

So instead of dancing, she was people-watching, observing everyone and trying to understand her... New classmates. It was an odd feeling to call these people that, especially since she had planned for the destruction of their way of life just mere months ago, but...

She felt good about it. Better than she had in a long time, in fact.

"Is this seat taken?"

Cinder looked towards the voice and saw Pyrrha Nikos giving her a soft smile as she motioned to Jaune's bed, which Cinder was sitting on. Shaking her head, she motioned for Pyrrha to sit. "Not at all. Is there something you need?"

Pyrrha sits but doesn't respond right away, a nervous look about her as she wrings her hands around each other. Cinder realises what sort of tone this conversation is likely going to have, and hums as she leans forward, supporting her chin with a hand.

"I hear that you are to thank for Jaune's continued enrollment at Beacon. Have you ever considered that you helping Jaune improve himself and stay at Beacon means that you, effectively, saved the world from the dastardly evil schemer?"

Pyrrha laughs at that, her nervousness falling away for a moment at Cinder's joke. Cinder finds herself enjoying the look on Pyrrha's face more than the stressed one she had before... Just another way Jaune had thoroughly changed her, she mused.

As Pyrrha's laughter dies down, Cinder smiles at her. "In all seriousness, I know what you are going to ask me about, Pyrrha. You've been tiptoeing around the subject for the last week or so... So let me just say it plainly. Yes, me and Jaune are together-together, as Nora would put it."

She sees the girl flinch at her words, her eyes darting around to the other people in the room, but they were too busy partying to stand a chance of hearing Cinder's words, especially as she had lowered her voice specifically to avoid embarrassing Pyrrha.

"I... I see. Do you *know*?"

It was mildly amusing to see a girl like Pyrrha Nikos -famed for her confidence and talent in the arena- blushing and fidgeting like a schoolgirl, but... Well, Cinder didn't have much ground to stand on to judge her for that. It's not like Pyrrha abandoned plans to destroy a whole Kingdom over a boy who liked her...

"Yes, Pyrrha, I *know*. I didn't at first if that's what you're asking, but I realised right after we were told the good news... I doubt Jaune himself knows, he's as dense as iron, but I saw how you looked when our hands met."

She saw Pyrrha swallow, her hands coming to cover up her face as her cheeks burned red. It was admittedly a 'cute' sight, especially since this was such a... Different interaction between herself and the other girl than she had first planned for all those months ago.

Would she ever get used to the idea that she was one of these people now? She wanted to, but after years of living as she had, and then in Salem's 'care'... Could she ever? Shaking her head slightly, she took a deep breath. Worries for later, if she must worry at all.

"I don't want you to get between you or anything, Cinder. I promise I will never try that. I know we aren't... Friends outright just yet, but I want you to know that. I doubt my feelings towards Jaune will change, but..."

Cinder raised a hand and patted Pyrrha's shoulder, surprising the girl with the supportive contact. "I understand, probably the most out of anyone, how you feel. So don't worry, Pyrrha Nikos. I won't tear your head off for being in love with my... Boyfriend. Just means you have good taste."

The word felt so weird coming from her mouth, but as weird as it was it felt *right*. Well, right for the moment. She would likely upgrade that title one day, but that was for the future Cinder to organise and set in motion.

Pyrrha let out a small laugh that seemed so practised she wasn't sure anyone without her skill at reading people could hear the tinge of sadness underneath it. Cinder let her hand fall off of Pyrrha's shoulder and scooted her butt towards the other girl, bumping her shoulder and looking over at Jaune, who was currently regaling team RWBY with the 'daring stealth mission they had gone on into the depths of Beacon.'

Pyrrha seemed surprised by the shoulder bump, but returned it nonetheless, her eyes following Cinder's, and a smile forming on her face as Jaune acted out the most stereotypical 'sneaky walk' the two girls had ever seen.

"Plus, you're his partner, as much as I am his *partner* . And while we may not be friends now, we have plenty of time to become *friendly* with each other, since I doubt Jaune will let you or Nora or Ren vanish on him anytime soon."

She draped an arm around Pyrrha's shoulder and felt the girl stiffen, causing her to laugh and give the girl a slow wink as she whispered in her ear. "Don't you worry at all, Miss Nikos... I have a *vested interest* in making you and everyone else Jaune loves happy now that *I'm* in love with him and all that, so don't feel too disheartened."

She let the red-headed girl go, chuckling at how Pyrrha's face almost matched her hair. Standing up, she patted Pyrrha on the shoulder again and turned away from her with a sly smirk. "Who knows what the future holds?"

As she made her way over to Jaune, interrupting his storytelling with a searing -not literally- kiss, she found herself excited by the idea of not knowing the future. She had believed in destiny once, believed the purpose of her power was to follow that path...

But now she knew that *The Purpose of Power* was to forge her *own* path, walking alongside the people who *gave* her the power to keep moving on. Quite literally, in Jaune's case.

So as cheers -with varying levels of enthusiasm behind them- erupted from Team RWBY and JNPR and her previous minions, Cinder felt Jaune's arms wrap around her and found herself *truly happy* with how everything had turned out.

She didn't know what the future held, but she was looking forward to it either way.

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*Thank you all, for reading this story!*

*This is to be the final chapter of the **main story** for **[The Purpose of Power]** and I am super grateful for all of the love that you have given*

*it!*

*I wanna do shorter multi-fic stories like this eventually, but at the moment I am focusing on **[Remnant Light]** as well.*

*If you enjoyed this, I would suggest giving that a look too!*

*Again, thank you for reading -and hopefully enjoying- this story. :P*

*There will be an epilogue chapter next Monday, a glimpse into the future of Jaune, Cinder, and their family and friends' lives!*

*I look forward to seeing you there!*

## Chapter 6

"Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah!"

Anastasia Arc, the twelve-year-old daughter of Jaune and Cinder Arc, stands in the middle of the living room -the couch pushed back to give her extra space- and swings her wooden training sword in front of her like she had been shown to, her shoulders burning from the workout.

' 15! 16! 17! 18! 19! And... 20!'

Ana lets the sword drop out of her hand as she finishes her final set of the day, sighing deeply, her hands cramping slightly from having held onto her sword for so long. She didn't know how Mama and Daddy did this, and with their special Huntsmen and Huntress weapons, too!

But that was what she was training for! So that she could go to Signal and *learn* how her parents -as well as all of her aunts and uncles- did it. But for now... She needed water. Because otherwise, she was going to faceplant on their nice soft carpet.

After she guzzled down her water bottle she ended up face up on the carpet anyway, her arms spread and her chest rising and falling as she took deep breaths. She was crazy tired after finishing all of her workouts... And the smell of dinner being cooked in the other room didn't help, because now she was hungry, too.

"Daddy! When is dinner going to be ready?!"

There was silence for a moment and she heard the oven opening, and then her dad's voice came from the doorway. "Should be about 45 minutes, sweetie! Sit tight until it's done, alright? Your mother should be home soon!"

She pouted at that and pushed herself onto her feet, before immediately plopping back down on the couch. But as soon as the couch creaked slightly under her as she dropped onto it, her dad's voice shouted out again. "Don't forget to stretch if you're done, Ana!"

Ana let out a groan as she stood back up and went through the stretches she was supposed to do at the end of her workouts, grumbling about how tedious they were the whole way but doing them all.

She lets out a yawn as she finishes the final stretch and is about to sit back down when she starts to hear voices from outside. Her eyes widen from excitement as the front door opens, revealing...

"Mama! Auntie Pyrrha! You're back!"

Cinder Fall and Pyrrha Nikos, two of the premier Huntresses of their generation, had changed a lot from the photos of their school days.

Cinder's hair was longer now, reaching to about the small of her back, and she usually kept it in a short, messy ponytail when she was out on missions. Coupled with sparse, Dust-Infused armour that seemed like a lighter version of her dad's Huntsman gear over a black jumpsuit, she looked like a super cool fighter instead of a super fancy one as she did in her bright red dress.

Auntie Pyrrha also had much more armour than she did at Beacon, including a helmet that covered everywhere but her eyes, leaving her hair to fall out of the back, cut to the point that it only even reached her shoulders. Apparently, when she became a Huntress, she had decided to change her 'look' now that it wasn't dictated by a "PR team"... Whatever a PR team was.

At her shout, the two women both pause in their conversation and look over at her. Ana darts forward, *slamming* into Cinder's leg with a bearhug. As she squeezed her mother's leg Cinder's hand came down to ruffle her hair. "Hello, my little Ember. Have you been well-behaved for your father?"

Ana nodded rapidly, a goofy smile on her face. "Of course, I was! And I did all of my practice today, even my stretches!"

Cinder raised an eyebrow at her while Auntie Pyrrha giggled. "Oh? Was this before or after your father reminded you to?"

Ana froze as her mother *immediately* caught her and that caused the two women to laugh even harder. Auntie Pyrrha knelt before her and ruffled her hair as well. "Either way, good job, Ana! Why don't you show me how you've progressed since I was here last while your mum goes and says hi to dad, alright?"

"Okay! But then you guys have to tell me all about your mission!"

Ana grinned at Auntie Pyrrha as she nodded, dragging the older woman over into the lounge room and grabbing her wooden practice sword. She heard her mum call out her thanks to Auntie Pyrrha as she entered the kitchen, but Ana's focus shifted to showing Auntie Pyrrha how awesome she was with her sword.

Her exhaustion feels forgotten as Auntie Pyrrha claps and picks her up in a hug after Ana shows her a set or two of her drills. "Oh, you're doing so well Ana! I think pretty soon that we can start upping your training!"

Ana gasps in excitement at the thought of being trained by Auntie Pyrrha, only to hear a laugh from the direction of the kitchen. Ana and Pyrrha turned and saw her dad, Jaune Arc, laughing softly as he wiped his hands with a tea towel.

Cinder and Pyrrha had changed, but nowhere near as much as her dad had.

Even taller than he was in Beacon, and with more muscles as well. He towered over everyone in the room but Pyrrha, who was only a couple of inches shorter than him. His hair was a bit longer than it was in the photos she had seen, and he had grown a beard that covered the bottom half of his face in a tidy golden cloud.

Apparently, Aunt Weiss had once called him a 'noodle' but Ana couldn't imagine why. Dad seemed bigger than an Ursa, especially when he was in his shiny white and gold armour!

"How about we save *your* kind of training until Ana has perfected keeping her Aura up, alright Pyr? I barely survived and I was older than she is now, haha!"

Ana saw Auntie Pyrrha roll her eyes and shake her head. "You didn't 'barely survive', Jaune, you did fine!"

Jaune huffed, waving a hand at her as he tried his best and failed to stop a small grin from peaking through his beard. "Fine, right, *that's* what we'll call my *grueling agony*. I'm not saying no, I just wanna see that Ana can keep her Aura up in a spar first."

Ana let out a cheer at that and gave Auntie Pyrrha a small high-five when the woman held out her hand to her. She heard the adults in the room chuckle at that and rolled her eyes. Adults found the weirdest things funny.

Jaune hums as he steps back towards the kitchen and smiles when Cinder comes out of it holding a couple of cups and a jug of water. "Alright, kiddo. Just gonna get dinner to where I don't have to do anything for a while, and then I'll come sit down. Let's let the fearsome Huntresses sit down after their big mission?"

Ana could tell that this was one of those 'no argument' things as the two women were already moving towards the couch. Ana plopped down in one of the one-person chairs that surrounded the coffee table as Cinder and Pyrrha all sat down on the big couch.

She stays silent and drinks her water as Cinder reaches up and unclasps the back of Pyrrha's breastplate, swinging her legs over the redheaded woman's lap as she does so. Pyrrha barely even reacted to the contact, and instead just reached down to help take off the armoured combat boots Cinder was wearing.

It is a task that Ana has seen them perform a million times, but it was always impressive to see how quickly trained Huntsmen and Huntress could put on and take off their gear.

With their combat gear doffed, leaving only the clothes underneath it, Cinder and Auntie Pyrrha both look *far* more relaxed. It was a moment later that Jaune exited the kitchen once again, coming over and moving to sit down on the couch.

Cinder and Pyrrha both make him stand up for a moment longer as they make space for him between them, and Ana can hear Jaune just laugh softly as she plops down between them, Cinder's legs returning to their position, just over *his* lap now as she leans in and kisses him on the cheek.

Ana takes note that Auntie Pyrrha is shoulder-to-shoulder with Jaune as well, smiling at her parents. She would have wondered why, but her parents and Auntie Pyrrha had always been touchy like this.

She gags at the parental PDA and hears laughter from the three of them. To distract them from being gross and kissy, she points at Cinder and Auntie Pyrrha. "Now, how did your mission go?! Did you fight any cool Grimm?"

Cinder grins at her and nods, glancing in Pyrrha's direction for a moment. "Indeed we did. And not only that, but we also thought of a cool way to show you."

Ana was glad to see that her dad was just as confused as to what Cinder meant by that as she held out a hand towards the shelf under the TV, superheating a ball of glass that she kept there and floating it over to them, splitting it in half using her Semblance while Pyrrha did something similar with a chunk of metal she took out of her pocket.

Both of the women used their Semblances, and both Ana and Jaune were amazed to see the final result being two red-hot glass figurines modelled after Cinder and Pyrrha, as well as a bunch of Grimm that were made out of metal that glowed with Auntie Pyrrha's black Aura.

Ana saw her dad looking at both of them in as much awe as she was feeling at the moment, a giant smile on his face. "See? I always told you that you'd be good at glassblowing, Cin."

He then leaned in and kissed her cheek this time, causing Auntie Pyrrha to laugh once more as Ana booed loudly again. Cinder and Jaune joined in a moment later, but eventually, Ana's whining got them refocused back on their show.

It was *magical* .

With Cinder and Auntie Pyrrha taking turns narrating, Ana's bright blue eyes were *locked* onto the glass and metal models as they darted around the table, fighting each other as if they were alive.

It was the coolest thing she had ever seen her mother and Auntie Pyrrha do with their Semblances, and that was saying something when she was talking about two of the coolest Huntresses out there. (Sorry, Aunt Ruby!)

"That was amazing! You have to show the others that when they get back from Aunt Yang and Aunt Blake's house! Oh, and Ella too! I can go get her so she can see it now!"

Her excitement, as well as her thinking of her siblings, seemed to please her mother and Auntie Pyrrha, but they shook their heads. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, my little Ember. But you know Ella has homework today. Let her focus until dinner time. After dinner, I'm sure Pyrrha and I can show you two and your brothers this again."

With their show concluded, Ana is bored again for a good while as the adults start talking about adult stuff.

She is half-tempted to ask Auntie Pyrrha to come outside and practise with her seeing as bugging her little sister was off the table, but she seems plenty happy tucked in with her parents on the couch and Ana isn't impatient enough to ruin that for her when she knew she could get trained tomorrow or something.

Eventually, *thankfully*, there is a knock at the door. Ana is on her feet before any of the adults, having been *waiting* for something to do while they talk. Reaching up, she twists the doorknob and opens the door.

"Hello again! Welcome back!"

The smiling faces of Aunt Yang and Aunt Blake are what she sees first, before her younger brothers rush forward into the house, excitedly rambling about their day... All at once, meaning that Ana can't understand much of it.

Doren's gold eyes were wide open with excitement and his shaggy blonde hair was waving all over the place as he tried to talk over the twins. He was the second oldest of their family after her. He was also trying to say something about 'Bumblebee' so Aunt Yang had probably taken them out on her motorbike at some point. That kind of made her jealous, but she would counter him with the fact that she was gonna get Auntie Pyrrha training her soon.

Henry and Charles, the twins, were the next oldest after Doren and had light brown hair and blue-green eyes. When she'd asked why their eyes weren't either just blue or gold like their parents, she had gotten 'colour theory' taught to her by her mum, who was surprisingly good at art, but she didn't really understand it further than blue + yellow = green.

They were talking over each other so much that she didn't get *any* information about what they were saying, but from the sly smiles on their face, that might have been intentional. They could be so annoying sometimes!

Luckily she is rescued from their information bombardment by her dad, who taps each of her brothers on the head, silencing them as he does so. "Come on now, boys. Don't crowd your sister, alright? Say goodbye to the Belladonnas."

She giggled as all 3 of her brothers froze in place and gave their dad a vague-looking salute, only to break down into laughter themselves as they said their goodbyes and ran off back to their room to... Probably do some mischief in some way or another. Little brothers were a *hassle* .

Looking past her dad, who was joining the other adults at the doorway, she saw Cinder and Auntie Pyrrha speaking to Aunt Yang and Aunt Blake.

And looking down at their legs, she smiled as she saw some of her best friends. She wasn't quite sure how Aunt Yang and Aunt Blake had kids, but she was just told that they would explain it all to her when she was older.

Eve, her absolute bestie, had purple eyes and light blonde hair a few shades lighter than Aunt Yang's. She waved in Ana's direction and Ana waved back, a smile on her face as she remembered how Eve had texted her earlier praising her for not going crazy while living with her brothers.

Ana's eyes drifted over to Eve's brothers now, her eyes narrowing as she saw them both sticking their tongues out at her and making goofy faces.

Mowgli was the oldest of the Belladonna kids. He had Blonde hair and amber eyes, with a fluffy cat's tail that thrashed around behind him as he pulled his mouth open to make an even sillier face, crossing his eyes as he did so.

Then there was Leon, the youngest Belladonna. Black hair like his mum, as well as oddly familiar, bright blue eyes that had never made sense to her -but she was told it was another one of those 'we'll tell you when your older' things- and cat ears poking out from his head like his mum had. He was flapping said ears up and down and sticking his tongue out, his hands on either side of his head and waving back and forth.

Ana returned the silly faces by making a fish face and scrunching her forehead as she blurred her eyes. It is only after Eve starts to laugh at her that she notices that the adults have gone silent, staring at her and the two Belladonna boys.

Aunt Blake is the first one to speak, and even though Ana is looking down at the floor, embarrassed, she can *hear* the smirk in the woman's voice. "I think we should be wrapping this up then if the children are so bored. I look forward to hearing about how your efforts with Ozpin to restore his Magic are going on Saturday."

She then turned to Cinder and Pyrrha, a soft smile on her face that felt familiar. But then again, Aunt Blake did kinda look like if you added cat ears to Cinder. "And it was good to see you again, Cinder, Pyrrha. We missed you when we were picking the boys up."

Cinder smiled and nodded. "No worries at all. Pyrrha and I only got back from our mission an hour or two ago, so that would explain it. Thank you again for having the kids over."

Aunt Yang let out a barking laugh at that, and Ana looked up to see her with her hands on the back of her head, a smirk on her face. "You kidding? We love the little tykes. Plus they've been *begging* for me to let them have a go on Bumblebee for weeks now."

Jaune smiled, shaking his head good-naturedly as he raised an eyebrow in Aunt Yang's direction. "I can't believe that you'd let my sons ride Bumblebee, but haven't let me after all of these years."

Aunt Yang just shot him a wink and grinned. "Maybe if you weren't such a clutz back in Beacon I might trust you with it... Anyway, we should leave before the kids decide to mutiny. Are you guys still alright to have our ones around on the weekend?"

Jaune nodded, leaning down and patting the Belladonna kid's heads one by one. Ana could see a... Strange look on his face as he did so, but she didn't point it out 'cause that would be rude. "Of course, we love seeing them."

Aunt Yang let out a small sigh, the same odd look on her face as she smiled softly. "Ah, yeah, well... I wish we could let you see them more, 'cause, well, haha, you guys know..."

Ana cocked her head to the side but before anyone could ask what she meant, Cinder clapped her hands, drawing everyone's attention. "Indeed, but don't worry. We're all busy with work and the like, and it's not the right time to tell them about that yet. Now, I have been *really* looking forward to this casserole so I don't want dinner to burn... So we really do have to say goodbye now. But we'll see you all again on Saturday!"

Aunt Blake bumped into Aunt Yang's shoulder at that, and the two families shared their goodbyes. The Belladonna hopped into their car (Ana was sure Aunt Yang would have preferred all of them to have their own motorbike but the kids were still little like she was) and vanished around the corner of the street while Ana waved at their car.

She saw Jaune rush back into the kitchen and heard him open the oven again, and the smell of casserole *flooded* the downstairs part of their house. Ana felt her stomach grumble at the *thought* of her Dad's famous casserole and turned to her mum. "Can I go grab Ella and the boys down for dinner?"

Cinder smiled at her, and Ana grinned back. A yes would mean that they could eat soon, while a no would mean she would have to wait a little longer... "Yes, you can go grab them from upstairs now, Ella can be done with her homework for the moment."

Victory! Dinner was Imminent!

Ana sprinted up the stairs and rapidly knocked on Doren's bedroom, where she could hear the 3 boys and yelled out that dinner was almost ready. She was still moving by the time Henry poked his head out of the doorway to ask her what was for dinner, so she just yelled back 'Casserole!' and kept going.

She slows down as she reaches Ella's room and knocks politely, poking her head inside to see the smaller girl with her headphones on attempting to finish her math homework. Ella already wanted to follow in their parent's footsteps (or more specifically "favourite Aunt Ruby's" footsteps) and become a Huntress just like Ana did, and part of that was doing well on their homework in normal school before combat training was even talked about.

Ella was super serious about a lot of things for a 7-year-old, but after that rule had been set, Homework became a time when basically no one was allowed to disturb her. Luckily for Ella, Doren and the boys were too busy pranking each other to mess with her most of the time.

"Ella? Yo, Ella!"

Her first call didn't breach her focus, but the combination of wildly waving arms and a slightly louder call got Ella's attention. The girl pouted at her, pulling one headphone off. "Ana! I'm doing my homework! You know you're not supposed to bug me!"

The admonishment was more cute than guilt-inducing, and Ana hid the smile it brought. "Dinner is almost ready. Mum and Dad said you should come downstairs now."

Ella froze, glanced at her work, and sighed. Dinner time trumped Homework time, unfortunately for her. When your parents could be called out on missions at any time, family dinner became a very important affair.

Ella hopped out of her chair and Ana grinned as she got close, grabbing onto the girl's arms and hoisting her up onto her back. A plus of having your Aura unlocked was that your little siblings felt like they weighed the same as a bunch of grapes!

*" Ana! Let me goooooo!"*

Ana grinned and ignored Ella's whine as she sprinted back down the hallway, her speed only ever so slightly inconsistent as her Aura control still wasn't perfect, but then she'd only had it for about a year so that made sense!

She stopped running with her Aura as she neared the staircase, another rule her parents had made after she tumbled down it the first time and almost used up her whole Aura in one go. Ella was still pretty light either way, and she reached the dining room quickly, letting her sister down off her back.

Ella immediately ran off to say hello -and give big hugs to- Cinder and Aunt Pyrrha, who had still been out when Ella had gotten back from school. Ana just smiled at the adorableness of her little sister and took her seat across from Charles at their huge dinner table. If needed she knew it could hold up to 12 chairs, but they usually only used about 8 on most nights.

Luckily, she had been right in the fact that dinner was close by, as almost as soon as her butt hit her chair, Jaune exited the kitchen with Casserole in hand, the plates and cutlery he had tucked under his arm starting to glow with black energy as Aunt Pyrrha grabbed them with her Semblance and moved them in front of everyone.

Ana was practically vibrating as her serving was placed in front of her, and she *attacked* the casserole more like a Beowolf than a 12-year-old girl. Her rapid pace caught the attention of her mother first, who clicked her tongue at her. "Anastasia Arc, at least breathe in between bites!"

Ana wilted a little under her mother's sharp gaze, but as Auntie Pyrrha laughed softly and whispered something, Ana saw her mother let out a small sigh. "Ana, you don't have to worry, we're going to do the thing for the others again when everyone is done. You eating faster won't speed that up, so eat properly."

Ana sent Auntie Pyrrha a smile even as she felt a little disappointed that she would have to wait for everyone to finish before seeing the

cool fighting models. She ate the rest of her food -only having a couple of mouthfuls left anyway- and then spent the next five minutes glaring at Doren, the slowest eater in the family, who sweated under her intense glare.

Her dad said that she 'Had her mother's Glare' and had been subjected to said glare when Ana had asked him if that was a good thing.

Eventually, thankfully, even Doren was able to eat fast enough for Ana to not feel *too* bored, and she got to watch, once again transfixed, as her mum and Auntie Pyrrha manipulated the Glass and Metal dolls with their respective Semblances.

Even having seen it before, she and her siblings all cheered and shouted as the Glass Huntresses valiantly slew the endlessly regenerating hordes of Iron Grimm. And the 'fight scene' was even a little different this time as well because of the extra space they had on the dinner table, which meant that even she got to see new stuff!

She couldn't help her massive grin as she saw the absolute awe in her sibling's eyes as Cinder and Auntie Pyrrha detailed their success against a Deathstalker Major and knew that she must have had a similar look on her face earlier.

Their show concluded and their dinner finished, they just stayed at the table and talked for a while, even if Ana could see that Ella was getting antsy. She likely wanted to head back upstairs and continue on her homework, but she stayed as well, because...

"Hey guys, before you all run off, your mother and I... Well, actually, all three of us wanted to talk to you about something."

Ana narrowed her eyes at her dad, who looked -and sounded- more unsure of himself than she had ever heard him be. He was a super cool and confident Huntsman most of the time, so what could have him spooked?

"Wait, has something bad happened?"

Ana couldn't help but giggle slightly at her dad's reaction to Henry's question, his eyes wide and his hands waving in front of him and Cinder and Auntie Pyrrha laughed softly at him. "No, no! Everything is fine, great, actually, but... It's just really big news, and a potentially big change."

She saw him glance at Cinder and Auntie Pyrrha and *something* passed between the three of them because Cinder reached forward and placed a hand on Auntie Pyrrha's as she nodded at Jaune before speaking up.

"Nothing is wrong, my little embers. We've expected it for a while, but now that it's actually happening... We're all just a bit nervous about what you guys will think about it, does that make sense?"

Ana hummed as she glanced at her siblings and was glad to see that they seemed just as confused as she was, but she nodded anyway. If Mum said it was good news then it couldn't be a bad thing, surely!

Her attention went back to her dad as he also reached over and patted Auntie Pyrrha on the shoulder, before speaking again.

"Basically, it's, well... You know how we all love your Auntie Pyrrha, right? She's basically family?"

"YEAH!" Ana winced as Ella yelled right next to her, the only one of her siblings who looked up to Auntie Pyrrha more than Ana did, "She's like a second Mama!"

Ella's words caused a moment of silence that almost started to feel awkward... Until the adults all started to *burst out laughing*, the statement being funny for some reason. With her mum hunched over laughing and Auntie Pyrrha fanning her red face, it was up to Jaune to continue.

"Yes! That's actually what we wanted to talk to you about. Would... How would you guys feel if 'Auntie Pyrrha' actually *became*, uh,

Mama Pyrrha?"

Ana isn't alone as she lets out a gasp, staring at her dad with wide eyes. She also isn't alone as her head swivels to Auntie Pyrrha, who has a worried -yet hopeful- look on her face... And a hand scrunched up on her shirt right above her stomach.

As the others start to talk over one another about the question her dad had asked... It is only Ana -who as the oldest is the only kid there that has had any kind of sex ed- who understands where Jaune is going with this before he explains it.

"DOES AUNTIE PYRRHA HAVE A BABY IN HER BELLY?!"

*Immediately* everyone's eyes are on her, and she clamps her hands over her mouth, not having intended to shout it that loudly, but the realisation had just been that shocking. Ana's wide eyes were met by her mother's, who now had one arm fully around Auntie-Mama Pyrrha's shoulder, hugging the woman tightly.

"Frankly, I'm surprised it took this long to happen... But yes. Your Auntie Pyrrha has a baby in her belly. A new half-brother or half-sister to join our family. Isn't it wonderful?"

" *AUNTIE PYRRHA!*" (x4)

Ana doesn't even get the chance to respond as the shocked muttering turns into a stampede of children all deciding at the same time that they need to hug their Auntie Pyrrha, the second most important woman in all of their lives, as the woman seems almost ready to cry.

Ah, and there the tears went.

Ana -who hung back to not rush her as much as the others- is the only one who doesn't fall victim to the massive scooping motion Auntie-Mama Pyrrha makes as she picks Ella, Doren, Charles, *and*

Henry up with little-to-no strain at all, shaking them as she cried into their hugs.

Her eyes fall on her parents, who stand a small distance behind the group, hand-in-hand as they watch Ana's brothers and sister pepper Auntie-Mama Pyrrha with questions and further hugs. They are looking at all of them with such blatant love and happiness in their eyes that Ana feels her almost-a-teenager instincts kick in as she cringes at the blatant show of affection.

Her people-watching is disturbed, however, as Pyrrha sweeps her up in her hug as well. Ana only briefly has a moment to wonder if the five of them actually weigh anything to Mama Pyrrha at all before kisses are planted on the tops of all of their heads as Mama Pyrrha moves them all over to Ana's parents, who join the group hug.

Eventually, Mama Pyrrha and the adults let them all go, and they tumble unceremoniously to the floor, laughing all the while as their parents wrap Mama Pyrrha in a hug of her own. As she looks at the hug, a question pops into Ana's head.

"Wait, does this mean that Mama Pyrrha is going to live with us from now on?"

Ana hears a sob of joy escape Mama Pyrrha as her question, and as Jaune tucks her face into her shoulder to let her continue to happy-cry, it is Cinder who answers. "Indeed she will. It would be remiss for her to live anywhere else but with her family, would it not? But... Why do you ask, my little ember?"

A massive grin forms on Ana's face as she stands up tall, pointing at Mama Pyrrha and raising her voice enough to reach the whole room, even over everyone else's questions and talking. "In that case, I call dibs on all weekday afternoons for training with her!"

A moment of true silence follows her declaration before sound explodes around her. Complaints and 'nuh-uhs!' from her siblings, and a round of laughter from her parents... All 3 of them.

"I'm serious! You have to respect the sacred rule of dibs!"

It was only more laughter that followed, and Ana soon found herself dropping the issue. There would be plenty of time to train with Pyrrha in the future, but for now, she let her 'dibs' fade from memory as she focused on hugging her new Mama close.

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*Hello Hello! Thank you so much for taking this wild ride with me! I sincerely hope that you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. I've come to love RWBY as one of my favourite series ever, so I am gonna be writing a whole lot more for it from here on out!*

*Please keep an eye out for new stories as they come out, and don't forget to check out my other RWBY longfic, and my 'main' RWBY story, **Remnant Light!** See you all next time!*

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**KnightFall Kids** Ana - (12 years old) - Dark brown hair, Blue eyes. Doren - (10 years old) - Blonde hair, Gold eyes. Henry - (9 years old) - (Twin) Brown hair, Blue-green eyes. Charles - (9 years old) - (Twin) Brown hair, Blue-green eyes. Ella - (7 Years old) - Black hair, Blue eyes. **Bumblebee Kids:** Eve - (11 years old) - Light Blonde Hair, Purple Eyes Mowgli - (9 years old) - Blonde Hair, Amber Eyes, Fluffy Cat Tail Leon - (9 years old) - Black Hair, Blue Eyes, Cat Ears