# Death Would've Been Preferable

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## Summary

Ruby Rose, long retired from her career as a Huntress, now spends her time helping aspiring Huntsmen/Huntresses in a basic tenant of the job: making kick-ass weapons that are also guns.

## Notes

This is going to be my first RWBY fanfic.  
I regret nothing. I hope you love it.
Cinder Fall stood by the mirror, and silently cursed at the clock ticking away in the corner.

Currently, she was sitting in a chair that was just a little too well used, but one she refused to give it up on the grounds that she’d need to break in a new one if she replaced it. She held a letter in her hand, the first letter she could actually remember receiving. She’d had packages or verbal messages delivered plenty of times, but the idea of a piece of paper with words on it had just completely slipped her mind until one sat in her hands last month. It was emblazoned with the official seal of the Vale council, and an old sigil Cinder hadn’t seen in years: Beacon academy. She’d read and reread the letter several times; after leaving it in her otherwise-empty mailbox for nearly a week out of sheer spite. By this point she could probably create a perfect forgery by memory alone.

Dear Ms. Fall

I have a proposition for you, but seeing as your current living situation leaves you beyond easy correspondence, I will be coming to visit in person to discuss it with you. I will be in and about the region near the end of the month.

-Jaune Arc, Beacon Academy.

It was short, almost sweet, and practically rolled off her mental tongue.

Cinder hated that letter.

The letter was almost parental in how it presented the fact that Cinder still lived where she did. There was no ‘please reply to ensure we have the right address’, just a ‘we know you’re still where we left you’. Jaune Arc had never been that self-assured. He had once been the sorriest excuse for a fighter Cinder had ever seen; and she knew Arthur Watts. But had thrown that yoke off by the last time Cinder had seen him something like two decades ago. Age had apparently brought confidence
for him, or at least whoever wrote his letters.

Not sure just when in the day the man in question was supposed to arrive, Cinder took the chance to get up from her long suffering seat and ensure she wasn’t a total mess in the tall mirror hanging in her bedroom.

She looked… Okay. She’d looked far better once. Back then, she still had two arms to call her own. The scars that littered her body—including the one that spanned her entire left side from ankle to ear—really didn’t bother her so much these days, though she still generally preferred hiding them when the climate allowed. The tunic she wore was irritantly local. It lived somewhere between a robe and a heavy jacket, ensuring protection from the nipping chill of eastern Vale’s late autumn while still sporting a distinct Mistrali flair thanks to Cinder’s personal touches. Her coal-black hair lacked it’s former health and shine though another victim of geography and logistics.

But it was her eye, her singular amber eye, that stood out to her today. It had once shone with defiance and power, barely containing the power of what Cinder had thought of as gods. But today, so long after her Magical powers had been stripped away and her defiance crushed alongside, her single eye just looked tired.

Her left sleeve hung knotted and empty at her side, pairing with her similarly-lopsided haircut to ooze ‘off-balance’ to anyone looking at her. Cinder had considered obtaining a prosthetic replacement for her arm on multiple occasions, but every time realized just how limited her budget was, subsisting off a few odd jobs and—she shuddered just thinking the word—charity. The rest of her body had been well maintained, though. Cinder hadn’t swung a blade in decades, but she still kept up the routine of habitual exercise; aided by the simple existence of an unlocked aura, and antagonized by the extremely limited ingredients available to her.

Fed up with the powerless woman in the mirror, Cinder’s gaze inched its way to a calendar stuck to her refrigerator. More specifically it moved to today’s date. It was odd, having any kind of planned event or forewarning beyond daily repetition. The last thing to have broken the monotony of village life was the small envelope delivered to her via a… mailman.

Even the simple memory of the letter made Cinder send one more silent curse at the tiny little town she’d been holed up in for the better part of twenty years. Physical mail, inane gossip—Seriously, not even so much as a saucy rumor surrounding the Faunus baby born to the Ulys family last year! ‘donor is an old family friend’ my ass! —and probably worst of all: the sheer, unadulterated contentment that pervaded the entire settlement. It wasn’t a condition Cinder shared, made blatantly obvious by the increased grimm activity on her side of town. The beasts knew to keep their distance from the truly important structures though. Cinder had made sure of that the first time the shadowy creatures had so much as left a footprint in her poor attempt at an herb garden.

There was just far too much to hate in this awful little town, but there was a reason Cinder had never dared leave it. For all the vapidly positive strangers, and the lack of proper seasonings. At the very least, there was one Cinder deterrent this town didn’t possess within its ramshackle walls:

Ruby Rose.

The same Ruby Rose who, barely a week after saving the world from utter destruction at the hands of the Brother Gods, stripping Cinder of her Magic, and defeating Salem (all in the span of a single day), had decided to drop Cinder’s unconscious body in this stupid cottage. Tucked into bed with the property deed on the nightstand along with a letter and a pitcher of water. Even worse was that it wasn’t some act or character she wore for greater acclaim; Ruby Rose actually believed that
telling the gods responsible for her very existence to ‘Go lick a nevermore!’ was reasonable, and what anyone else would have done.

Ruby Rose terrified Cinder like nothing else in existence.

But what didn’t terrify Cinder was the man who was supposedly in town today, roughly a month after Cinder had received his letter. She’d only learned he was nearby when the idle gossip of the old hens in town—not to be confused with the Verdan family, who happened to be young, happy, and of all things, chicken Faunus—turned from daily life to the apparently quite handsome huntsman making his way towards them. Tales of his blond hair, startlingly white armor, and impressive endurance had all become commonplace in the past week.

Cinder fall didn’t fear the man who matched her memory of Jaune Arc, but she did wonder just what this deal of his was about. Why had he reached out to her in the name of a newly-reopened Beacon Academy, official down to the very letterhead? Why was he bothering with Cinder at all? They’d only tried to kill one another a handful of times all told—and in her old life that had all the significance of a casual handshake. Was it just to rub salt in the wound that was her current life? Maybe let her reclaim some lost dignity by killing her in a fit of rage?

Still, it wasn’t as if Cinder had anything else to do today, so she made her way away from the mirror, choosing to wait in her favorite chair for the arrival of her guest. To pass the time, she flipped open an honest-to-Maidens soul-wrenchingly bad romance novel she’d acquired from the last trade caravan to pass through. So, Cinder waited.

And soon enough, there came a polite knock at the door. Making her way over, Cinder allowed herself one last moment of hesitation. The questions that had filled her heard earlier oddly silent, anticipation and anxiety ruled her nerves equally. Cinder was jolted out of her mental rut by another knock at her door. Finally deciding it was time to get this ordeal over with and swung the door wide open.

On the other side stood none other than the promised Jaune Arc, doing his best to look disarming and friendly. "Cinder Fall, I’d like to make you a deal.”

The door slammed shut before Cinder had time to question why she’d done it.

Cinder questioned so many things about her life.

Foremost, she questioned just how different her life might have been had she attained the power she craved. What would have actually happened? If all went to plan, Cinder had intended to achieve immortality, or at the very least a long successful life of dictatorship followed by a death-by-pleasure in her personal harem. Magic but a strain on one’s body unfortunately, and she wondered if her body could even contain the power of two maidens combined, let alone four. Maybe Salem or Ozpin would have known, but Cinder doubted they ever would have shared that information willingly.

Salem was a whole separate bag of worms. If Cinder had never accepted her promise of power in the first place, what would her life have been? Where would Cinder, the lone survivor of a Grimm-ravaged village, have ended up? There was a very real chance she’d be dead a thousand times over from starvation or being caught up in a war she’d never know anything about, but she was thinking hypothetically. Or, in a different world, would she have joined a combat school, chosen to find happiness in fighting grimm and saving lives? Would that have been a happy life?
In the more recent past, power had brought her fleeting happiness. Like a drug she had sought out the highs of weilding her power over the heads of others. Those who followed by choice, or those who stood in her path were both subject to her whims and fits. But she had been alone at what she thought was the top, and had thought that was what true power was.

Her past self was an idiot.

Her present self? The Jury was still out.

For the time being, Cinder was striding back onto the school grounds she had once been instrumental in the destruction of. Now it was restored to full working order, and nearly empty. It was early summer, and Cinder assumed that classes had just let out for the semester. The heat was bearable to her, but then Cinder had experienced kinds of heat few others ever could; Vale sunlight had nothing on the pain a grimm felt when burned away by silver eyes.

The deal Jaune had offered, it turned out, was not to run Cinder through with a rusty spoon covered in barnacles. It was, instead, the very last thing Cinder had expected.

Amnesty.

A political forgiveness, of sorts. Promised redemption, and a surefire way out of that little backwater she’d called home for so long. Also not being arrested and publicly executed on sight by the Kingdoms, that was definitely an upside.

It had been nearly six months since the blond-haired, blue-eyed idiot had first come to visit her in exile. She had immediately turned him away that day. Not even letting him finish his sentence. But after months and months of regular visits every third weekend—sometimes with a gaggle of academy-aged children and sometimes carrying odd tools and weapons—Jaune had worn her down by just... being nice. Him, and any entourage he might bring, would help repair her slowly-deteriorating cottage. Replacing fences, restocking her pantry, attending to her herbs, and just generally helping her around the house. having one arm and half the range of vision most people enjoyed really did a number on one's ability to live independently... or at least sweep effectively.

Much to Cinder’s consternation, Jaune did eventually wear her down enough to listen. And apparently a bit more than that as she was now being escorted along the pathways of Beacon and getting the full mission statement all at once.

"It's taken a while, but even after everything we did the world needs people willing to help defend against the Grimm or stopping... people like you. To do that most will need training, and the best training comes from instructors who know what they're talking about." Jaune explained as they entered the grounds he once called home.

"So, what? You expect me to teach a horde of hormonal monsters the terrors of accepting deals from nefarious secret organizations? 'How to subvert a terrorist organization and influence people'? Oh, why not a class on how to avoid infusing yourself with ancient, dangerous Magic for a chance at greater, ultimately fleeting power?" Each question came out more and more vitriolic than Cinder had intended.

Jaune laughed. He actually, full on, earnestly laughed at that. "Unfortunately 'Subversion and Infiltration' is already fully staffed, and while we're still looking for a head of the Archeology department, I somehow think that isn't quite up your alley. You also lack teaching credentials and experience." Oh look, the jury's back: 'Definitely an idiot'.

Cinder really needed to figure out if Jaune knew she was joking and played into it, or really was
that clueless. Either way, him pointing out her lack of 'real-world' skills stung just a bit.

"To get past that there's a few hurdles, one being we have to prove you're not going to lead a coup with your students, or kill them,"

Cinder considered the idea of leading an army of children for a moment longer than she ever had before. She had issues, sure, but her age limit for targets was strictly half-her-age-plus-seven: nobody liked a creep. "Don't worry, I learned my lesson after Mercury and Emerald. The time investment for training a loyal disciple is rarely worth it."

Jaune looked nonplussed, but did his best to move on. Leaving the courtyard to enter a large hall by way of a large set of wooden doors, Cinder took a moment to enjoy the sudden addition of properly cooled air after the heat outside. "Then you'd have to prove to your coworkers you know what you're doing. That should be relatively easy, assuming you aren't too rusty with your Semblance these days."

Unfortunately, Cinder was exactly 'too rusty' at the moment. She could manipulate small-dust still, but so much of her versatility had been tied to Maiden Magic that she really hadn't done much to stay in practice. Luckily semblance usage was practically instinctual after long enough using it though, she'd probably be able to assemble a rough glass shard again with just an hour of practice.

Coming to a large circular foyer connecting four long hallways, Jaune finally stopped walking and turned to face Cinder. "Finally, and here's the part I know you won't like, the council wants you to have a stake in something local. A bit of insurance you're not going to rampage through the city indiscriminately. Again." Jaune seemed the most nervous about that particular caveat. Odd.

Cinder narrowed her eye questioningly. "What kind of 'stake'? Do they want me to start a small business? How about a nice cafe? I can serve all sorts of unique blends and go up against corporate giants with the help of my ragtag group of friends and the local mafia," Cinder said, maybe a bit too seriously.

"Well, that is one possibility," Jaune answered. "But I'm not sure you have the lien for it. If you decide to go that route. Plus with whatever role you're expected to fulfill under your, we call them handlers, here you would need a full staff able to run it most days without you."

_The level of detail in that answer was... oddly specific._ Cinder had meant it as a joke, but maybe there was a history of that sort of thing.

"Realistically, you only have a handful of options that don't involve lots of money or some kind of intrusive monitoring device." He held up a finger "Your first option is the students here. Teach alongside a supervisor for a few years. Make friends with the students. Worry about if they're doing well after graduation. Be generally empathetic."

Cinder could feel the bile rising already. "Absolutely not."

"Before I explain the others, I should tell you. Emerald and Mercury were both offered the same deal with the same options; Mercury accepted the first." —_What could possibly be so bad that Mercury of all people decided to work with children?_— “and Emerald went with option two: Going through civilian higher-education. But a lot like the 'start a small business’ plan, that needs a sponsor or some way to pay for it. Like a job here at Beacon for instance."

“So, that option’s right out unless I happen to either be a genius or find myself a sugar daddy.”

Jaune nodded apologetically. "Given your history of clandestine operations, Atlas may be able to
give you a scholarship for signing on with them. Experience tells me that the regimented, disciplinarian lifestyle under an authority figure wouldn’t agree with you.” Cinder could only nod in agreement.

“So what’s the dreaded third option?” she asked.

Jaune sighed as he prepared to answer the question. “The third option is… kinda difficult for most people to just do. And was created to allow recent recipients of the Amnesty who successfully built new lives not need to start over so abruptly.”

Losing her patience as the so-far-so-confident man’s hesitation, Cinder’s temper flared. “Well? Spit it out already.”

“You’d need a family.”

Well, that was probably never happening. Cinder was not a ‘settle down’ kind of woman. Kids were right out. Jaune did say it was intended more for those who weren’t her. “So, teaching under a handler it is. At least tell me I’m not going to be working under some ancient, overweight librarian. I do have standards.”

Jaune waved his hand in dismissal. “Nothing like that. You’re a proven threat, Cinder. Your handler has to be able to, well, handle you. Luckily, the primary candidate chosen for you is in their classroom right now, let’s go tell them the good news.” Jaune turned down a different hall than the one they had entered from with a suspiciously happy hop in his stride.

Cinder, resigned to her fate by now, followed. The walk down the so very Vale grand hallway was quick and mercifully silent, the only thing of any real interest to look at was the occasional window overlooking the Forever Fall and the rather well-muscled shoulders of the man leading Cinder past them.

Coming to a stop at one of the many otherwise identical doors, Jaune rapped on the thick wood before stepping back at the muffled sound of a clatter on the other side.

A solid thunk rattled the door as the occupant impacted at a decent clip before swinging open into the hall. Cinder’s view was obstructed of just who was on the other side. Her hearing, less so.

A spine-chillingly familiar voice emanated from within the classroom. “Owwww… Who’s even here this late? It’s summer break, go home.”

"Ruby," Jaune said, opening the door the rest of the way. "I have someone you should meet" Sweet Maidens. I should have gone with the military.

Ruby Rose. The person who Cinder hated most in all the world—and feared most, besides—came practically bouncing out of the classroom. Before crashing into Jaune in a tight hug.

"Jaune! Welcome back. How was the hunt? Did you try the new dust rounds? How was the balance? Does the aim still drift to the left? Hi Cinder. Was the recoil to much? Should I realign the firing pin?" The questions came like the popping grease of frying bacon, Ruby barely even stopped for air as she inspected the weapon Jaune had offered to her.

Her short red hair was a completely unprofessional mop trying its best to live its dream of being an anemone. She was startlingly well dressed, otherwise. A pair of boots, sturdy yet uniquely stylish, ran up her shins. Tights ran up into her skirt—multilayered combat variety, of course. An extremely well-polished snowflake sat on her belt buckle with a variety of pouches and slots
accompanying along its dark brown length, with what appeared to be a strip of ribbon wound securely between them. A black corset and red cloak rounded out the strange trip down memory lane.

Ruby Rose looked practically identical to the last day Cinder had seen her. It infuriated her that time seemed to outright ignore the silver-eyed woman. She still looked ready to turn heads and lead armies, while Cinder’s own appeal had fallen from its previous perfection.

She was still beautiful, of course. But burns, scars, and missing limbs did not a flawless figure make.

"Ruby, it worked great, I'll get you the report later. Right now you should say hello to your new Assistant." Jaune gestured her way.

Glancing up from the weapon "Huh? I already did. Still not sure if the drift is a counterbalance or a seating issue." Turning towards Cinder, Ruby offered a handshake. "Hey Cinder, welcome back to Beacon."

Accepting the hand, Cinder didn't know if she had ever been more confused. This was the same person who had, the last time Cinder had seen her; forcibly burned a parasite made of pure negativity out of her body. Brushed off the gods. Saved humanity, and left Cinder to rot in that stupid little town with its babies and mailmen.

And still, here Ruby stood, smiling without a single shred of malice.

She didn't even attempt to shake hands with her own dominant hand first; she offered the one Cinder could correctly shake. It had taken Cinder a literal year to adapt to not having an arm there, and here was her worst enemy adapting so quickly there wasn't any hesitation in which hand to use.

Cinder might hate her more now than she did atop Beacon's tower as her left side was being burned away in holy fire.

"I'm glad you're doing well, I know you'll do your best by my students," Ruby said. Cinder searched for anything—the slightest flash in the woman's eyes to betray the mask she had to be wearing, but there was nothing. "I can do a lot with solid weapons, but once it's semblance-based I can really only direct my students towards old videos or pictures. A lot of the best quality ones feature you, at least in the school's records." She admits her weakness so easily. What kind of unholy abomination is Ruby really?

"I hate you." Cinder let slip

"Do you want a new arm? I know it's rude to ask, but if you had your balance back, it might be better for combat-oriented lessons. We can whip you up a temporary one with the facilities on campus, but it might take a bit for a fully functional one to get made."

Cinder questioned so many things about her life.
Chapter Summary

Welcome to 'Weaponry and Combat Integration' first-years!

Ruby sat at her desk and watched the clock.

Years ago she had sat in this same room and watched this same clock. well probably not the same clock, it had been years since she'd attended Beacon. Still, she remembered watching the spot on the wall, anxious of the test or report coming back to her. The feeling now was similar, but also decidedly unique

For one thing, she was currently able to see the desk she used to sit at what felt like lifetimes ago. The actual lifetime since then may have helped. It was a beautiful lecture hall, the wood expertly refurbished or replaced since the reopening of Beacon.

Ruby found herself playing with the buckle of her belt as she waited. One of the few pieces of ornamentation in her everyday outfit. The stylized snowflake shined by years of nervous tracing and general wear of being a Huntress. Rings may have worked for most civilians, but Hunter weapons did not play nice with jewelry. Mechashift or otherwise, high-intensity combat is not the place you want to learn what a degloved finger looked like. Just another life lesson to gift to those about to enter her door.

A chime sounded, and with it the madness of puberty poured forth into her domain of a clean and well-ordered workshop. Noisily making their way to seats in groups that had yet to become teams except in name. Ruby searched around the room, ensuring at least that the number was correct.

Waiting for the commotion to peter out with the second chime, Ruby addressed her new wards.

"Welcome to 'Weaponry and Combat Integration' first-years. I am Ruby Rose, my lovely assistant here is Crescent Rose." - she unfolded and presented her beloved weapon.- "For those of you with more semblance-based weaponry, Mrs. Arc also be assisting me starting tomorrow. But first: Congratulations on passing the entrance exam. Or maybe surviving is the right word. You've made it to Beacon, you've got your teams, and depending on what combat school you attended I'm sure you've at least tinkered with the weapons you're all carrying. So can anyone tell me why you're all in this class?"

Only one hand raised, and nervously at that. She happily noted the girl's response, Faunus heritage evidenced by the golden ears drooping atop her head. "I know you know the answer, give someone else a chance" Ruby answered with a chuckle and a smile. Unfortunately it seemed that no one else was going to take that chance. "Alright then, go ahead Jei, let em have it."

Jei stood up, took a breath, and in a voice very unlike her mother's practically suggested "they're, um, b-boring?" before slinking back into her chair, afraid of what her new classmates would think of such harsh words from one of their own.

"They're boring!" Ruby bellowed. "Each and every one of you are, at a minimum, on a team with someone who's life-defending, legend-inspiring, grimm-slaying weapon of choice is boring. Now,
don't take that the wrong way, simple can be good. Don't be ashamed of not having eighteen dust knobs or a toaster oven built into your weapon, neither of those are easy to clean after a fight."

"As the career of our very own Headmaster should teach you, sometimes all you need to be among the most legendary saviors of the world is muscle memory, a good teacher, and practice. If you go and ask him one thing he would have changed about his situation back before it all happened though; he'd tell you he wished he had some trick up his sleeve, more than once. I know because that's the words he pitched this class to me with years ago. I couldn't agree more, which is why we're all here now"

Pressing a button on her scroll, the wall behind Ruby lit up with various schematics and blueprints. "Behind me are displayed every weapon registered by the student body, and several teachers and friends. During the course of this class, you will have access to this database at varying times for research, inspiration, or strategising. For Today, I have personally selected a few from this catalogue. Your first assignment will be to sort through as a team and categorize them into two sets: Impractical and Boring. You have until the end of the period. Starting now."

The assignment was rigged, kind of. Every weapon really did fall into at least one of the two categories on its own, but weapons without a Hunter were just fancy sculptures. That's where the 'integration' came in. That, however, was a lesson for day two.

Ruby always loved seeing where the students placed her designs, and to a lesser extent those of her friends. She'd even thrown in a few jokes, including literally just an xray of Hazel Rainart. In her experience that always got a few raised hands, almost as many as when Weiss had tried transcribing Myrtanaster's schematics without help.

Memories, good and bad, of years past and the summer just ended, flowed as the period passed, all while Ruby sat at her desk and watched the clock.

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**Four months ago:**

Mechanisms, doohickeys, apparatus, bits that go 'sproing.' she had also been known to dabble in the fine art of thingies.

Ruby loved broken things.

Or maybe she loved the incomplete, the in-progress', the 'in need of love's. Something where, with a little effort and time, improvement shone.

Items were easy. A spring, a gear, maybe a wire or cable. Simple, had a job and did it. Didn't question why it was doing the job.

… _They didn't, right? Would Penny know? That would be a rude thing to ask. 'hey Penny! Do your individual parts also have souls?' 'Well Friend Ruby, funny you should ask. I was just talking to Crescent Rose…' _Ruby shook that particular thought out of her active mind. Her beloved weapon held more than enough secrets that should never be talked about, not that she didn't trust good ole' CR.

Weapons were just items attached to each other. They had parts you could see, clean, replace, or repair. Sharpening a blade gave instant results. They could be improved, and adapted, and didn't hate you for years.

People were less easy. Children easier than adults, they were rarely as set in their ways. They could
be broken just as much as any grown adult, but they could adapt much quicker. It all depended on the person, in the end.

To change was scary, to admit there was something that needed to change arguably scarier. As much as you couldn't force a person to change, it was certainly possible for your actions to change them.

She knew all too well the change she had forced on the woman in front of her.

Severe nonthermal, nonchemical burns along the entire left side of the body; thaumaturgical in origin, not dust. Nerves intact, but atrophied by exposure to alternate thaumaturgical energies; grimm-burnt and painful. Optical organ, left side, sealed over by burns; unknown status. Various internal inconsistencies; something had once cohabitated her body, it was not gentle.

The medical readout was high-end, but the suite connected to it wasn't kitted to do anything about most of these types of injuries. It was specialized for prosthetic installation procedures. Find the parts that need replacing, not fixing. Then upgrade the existing flesh to accommodate a working replacement.

Ruby technically didn't need to be here. She could have been home, sitting in her comfy spot on the couch Weiss had imported from Atlas. Snuggled up with the best family in the world. Maybe reading a nice book Blake would pick out for her, running her fingers through the hair belonging to a bundle of nerves that currently constituted Jei's rough shape and size.

Ruby was so proud of their not-so-little-anymore girl. She had made it through preliminary testing for beacon, all that stood between her and attending was initiation. Well, that and several months of preparation, intensified training, being spoiled rotten by 'Emmy', and of course; waiting.

Instead, Ruby was here. Reading the full rundown of her once bitter enemy's scars. Ruby could remember making every single one she was responsible for. Her mind was also putting together scraps of half-forgotten memories to make new ones for wounds she couldn't have inflicted at all.

She had never stabbed Cinder with any cylinder larger than a quarter inch in diameter, especially through the ribs. Even in their most desperate struggles against each other, Ruby didn't have a jaw that wide, or teeth that long. She had never used black dust to shatter a bone against itself. She wasn't even sure how anything could leave marks like that on a lung.

Yet, she blamed herself for all of them.

Half-memories filling in with details of fights continents and years apart from any encounter with the woman currently being operated on.

Cinder hated Ruby Rose, slayer of Salem, leader of teams RWBY RNJR RTND RPTR RUST RSST ROCY and countless others across the decades. Cinder did not however hate Ruby, professor of Beacon Academy, Wife, Mother, Daughter. No, hatred for who Ruby really was belonged only to herself.

People were harder than weapons, that much was true. Ruby Rose had never backed down from helping a person in need before though. She had gotten outside help, stepped aside, put it off, and even run from it before. But never backed down.

Cinder would wake to find herself squarely in Ruby's to-do pile.

"How's it feel? I had to guess at weight balances and actuator ratios, since we only have basic
foundry equipment for prosthetics. We should probably fix that soon, given we now have three staff who could make use of the facilities now; who knows how many students might need it eventually. I'll make sure it gets into the next budget." Ruby rambled while studying the connectors and stress points from a slightly less than comfortable distance. "finger test. Good."

Bringing up a small rubber ball from a shelf to her right. Ruby lightly tossed it towards Cinder. "Reaction speed and muscle memory acclimation good, grip strength a bit lacking. Shouldn't be too big of a problem for everyday use through."

Cinder seemed to know the drill, but hadn't said anything beyond quick answers to non-opinion questions since the tests had begun. It made Ruby nervous.

Running out of mechanical tests. Ruby moved on to the more personal ones "Well, it's about as good as can be for now. At least so far as instruments can tell me. Your aura seems to have accepted it, but does it have the fine control you need to use your semblance? Try bringing out Ashen Fate, might take a few tries."

"What?" Cinder's first real reaction to something came out hoarse. She gave a quick cough before repeating. "What is an 'Ashen Fate?' She gave Ruby a look like the woman had just suggested she drip a fleeturtle.

Now silver eyes reflected even more confusion back. "Your… weapon. The shards of obsidian you forge into bows, blades, and armor." did Cinder really not remember the name of her own weapon? Was the the weapons actual name? Did the weapon have a name at all?

Oh Maidens, Ruby had probably named them to make cataloging in the weapons database easier. *Idiot, you can't just go around naming weapons! Even if 'Mr Stabby' was a much better name than 'Poppin Off'er."

"You named my weapons 'Ashen Fate'?" Cinder still hadn't shown any emotion to the news, she was just staring down at her hands.

Ruby Rose was many things. None of those things were afraid to admit to a mistake. That's the best way to learn after all. "I mean, I guess so. Though technically Fate is specific to the dagger format. The swords were Verdict and Jury. The bow was jokingly labeled Spades, by Yang I think, and it kind of stuck. I did number the variants of each we have records of, but they don't seem to repeat basically ever."

"So, yes. I needed a name for your weapon for the system to be able to use it. Mercury wasn't around to ask, and Em didn't want to talk about it at the time. Speaking of Emerald, you should probably get in contact. She works ov-" Ruby was interrupted by a dagger being pointed at her. Not threateningly, just the sharp end was facing her. Cinder wore a small smile.

"I had never given it a thought. Naming your weapon seemed to be pointless when it always changed. Not to mention childish, at least at the time." it was a sad smile, but one not full of hatred was still a step up as far as Ruby was concerned.

"I still hate you, but you have my passing respect for such a well-fitting name. Ashen Fate it is." a small chuckle escaped her lips" Though I will never call any tool of mine 'ashen spades.' that pun is terrible, and my workout regiment has certainly slipped over the years." Cinder flipped the dagger between several styles as she spoke. Almost a nervous tick, but made to be threatening.

"I'm glad you like it. Every weapon deserves a name. Gives them personality, like a second partner. At least I think so." Ruby really was relieved. She had half expected to be screamed at, or at a
minimum threatened with bodily harm.

The acceptance was almost worse. Maybe a life spent fighting monsters had left Ruby paranoid. OK, it had definitely left her paranoid. But not usually around other people. She had anxiety sure, but Cinder not trying to make her life hell somehow felt like a nightmare.

She sincerely hoped there wasn't some underhanded reason why Cinder was being so polite. Was it really just gratitude?

Reading people had never been Ruby's string suit, she preferred reading things. What had happened to a thing before it reached her workbench. How it had failed, or succeeded too much. Things were so much easier to fix than people or emotions.

But at least making the attempt might help fix the problem, even if doing it blind could nuts make the problem worse. She had students who needed help that she couldn't provide, not directly anyway.

Problem? Meet Solution.

Now she only had to make sure Cinder wasn't going to stab her in the back. Possibly literally. Again.

It was going to be a long summer wasn't it?
Not to be confused with Salem's Lettuce

Chapter Summary

No sense dwelling on it, unless you're currently planning another upheaval of life as we know it.

Emerald Sustrai was not happy. Decidedly so.

She was not happy to be some glorified babysitter. She was not happy that the insufferable hemorrhoid with a name that rhymes with 'Jerkury' was doing well at his new job just across town.

She was most defenitely not happy that her boss had just skipped in, literally skipped, at this ungodly hour with an energy that had to be illegal from anyone older than nine. She had brought coffee though, some crimes could be forgiven. Emerald knew that all too well from experience.

"Good Morning Ms. Sustrai " the woman greeted teasingly. Her platinum hair shimmering as she turned. Stark blue eyes glowing with mirth. "Before you say anything, we have attempted to kill each other on several occasions, we are well into first name basis." - harsh, but true - "how is Mr. Black ?"

"Good morning Mis-... Weiss." Emerald caught herself. "The ball of lint so lovingly named Mercury is good. Classes begin later today, but you probably already knew that, and he's been talking my ear off about" she made a show if trying to remember " 'Whipping the little snots into shape' I think we're his exact words." accepting the cup offered, she took a swig of Salem's Nectar, and shuddered as the heat dispersed along with any sleep still lingering around the edges.

Weiss shrugged off her coat and turned back towards her bodyguard. She was dressed entirely in the usual blues and whites of the Schnee heritage; fashionable boots fresh from the runway, a pair of slacks and accompanying vest that would probably be able to cut aura with how sharp they looked, and of course her ever-present trio of hairclips.

Emerald, by comparison felt so… Uninteresting. Her green hair was still styled the same as it had been all those years ago. Her boots were sturdy and clean, but more for function than fashion. Her own slacks and shirt were ironed, but nowhere near as crisp looking as her employer's. She may as well just be in a sweater and yoga pants, in comparison.

"Well I hope so, Jei passed her entrance exam and dust knows she'll need everything she's about to learn once she graduates, or far before if nothing goes to plan." Weiss seemed to stare off a bit at that. Emerald couldn't really blame her, though she could certainly blame Emerald. "No sense dwelling on it, unless you're currently planning another upheaval of life as we know it. If that's the case, I expect a full report on the matter within three business days of being too late to get ahead of the problem." Weiss added with a wink. "I love the boots, by the way. I miss my old combat outfit, high fashion can go kick an Ursa compared to the comfort of broken in Huntress gear."

She strode into her office, leaving Emerald alone with her thoughts. Thoughts and a half dozen camera feeds she kept an eye on. Until her Scroll buzzed, then it became a half dozen feeds and a string of messages from none other than the mint licker she once called her partner. Mostly pertaining to his students trying to figure out just why "The Butcher" was teaching a class at the
very academy he had once been instrumental in the downfall of.

Life had certainly led her down some strange roads, after all, now "The Thief" was heading SDC security and making more lien an hour than some did in a week. It wasn't even a cover job for some shady hitwoman position! They did expected her to hire her own team though, with hefty bonuses if they were from situations like her own had once been.

Emerald Sustrai was not happy. Happy didn't begin to describe what she felt while giggling at Mr. Black's video of a certain golden-haired Faunus absolutely schooling her new combat teacher.

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**Nine Years Ago:**

Emerald was warm.

Maybe uncomfortably hot to some - but she had spent far longer in far warmer embraces. From the sands of Vacuo, all the way to foundries of Atlas during a production crunch.

Emerald had strode through the fires of a city set ablaze. She had fought in the middle of a burning forest, only able to breathe by way of chewing crystallized wind dust; it had tasted like a mix of some exotic fruit and earwax.

*I can still taste it when I cough*, She mused. Letting the not-uncomfortable weight responsible for said heat snuggle even farther into her. No, this heat was wonderful.

Contact of any sort really - Emerald had spent far too long before learning the absolutely amazing feeling of a pat on the back. People had touched her on occasion before that, but usually it was a warning hand on her shoulder.

Often it was a hand placed at high speeds against any and every part of herself. She was glad those memories were years behind her now.

Hugs were also wonderfully warm - some did border on hot, but those were years behind her now too. She still wondered if the sensation they left behind was due to the heat, emotion, or something less mundane.

The weight shifted. The body stirred, and unfurled itself in the first motions of waking. Golden ears twitching at sounds beyond Emerald's own ability to hear. Their owner now roused, she chuckled at just how warm the sight made her feel.

"Emmy, why'd you let me fall asleep? You promised." the young faunus shot a frankly terrifying set of puppy dog eyes towards her caretaker.

"I have literally committed war crimes less deserving of judgment than those eyes. Who authorized the creation of such a weapon?" Emerald teased as she tickled her young ward in revenge. "Was it Auntie Winter? She always was a loose cannon."

Breaking into squeals of laughter, Jei could barely answer between breaths "Nooo!" before being subjected to such terrible torture once more.

"It wasn't Winter? Where's your proof you little spy?" Emerald demanded before the little bundle of cute wriggled her way free.

"Auntie Winter can't be a loose cannon. She's like, a super tight cannon!" Jei presented an irrefutable case. With the confidence that only comes from youth - or bribes thereof.
"Ha! Well I guess I can't argue with logic as sound as that. But I'll find out eventually." Emerald fell back onto the couch, her quick but devastating tickle attack completed for the moment. "Maybe it was Doctor Polendina. He's just crazy enough to try and weaponize cuteness unironically."

Jei looked at her in the most perfectly quizzical way, head tilt perfected down to a degree. "Doctor Polendina? Like Henna?"

Oh, right. Watts offed the old man. She wouldn't have ever met him. Emerald found herself slipping into an old melancholy, her old life coming back to haunt her through the innocent questions of a child.

"Yeah, he'd be Henna's... grandad. Though he died before she came around." Memories tainted by her emotions at the time now held a different weight. They used that weight to slam against her mental walls. Walls seemingly intent on never really holding back the memories at all.

Emerald wondered if she should try to be more tactful around the young girl. Mercury probably would have regaled her with the actual event of the man's death - or maybe he would have tried to hide the entire idea of death from her altogether. He was always such a flip-flop in the weirdest ways.

Spring. Am I really missing that poor excuse for a flapjack? I've gone soft! Even my insults are food related, how is he a flapjack? You know what, yeah. He is a flapjack. I'll stand by that one till he proves me wrong.

Jei had always taken her moods and candor in stride though. Melancholy, spurts of sarcasm and casual mention of a life's-worth of mistakes were the norm when 'Emmy' spent the weekend watching her.

She was never Emerald Sustrai to the girl, not Ms Sustrai, or Em, or some awkward claim to family like 'Aunt Emerald,' or any other title. It made Emerald feel special that she had a name just for the girl.

Jei wasn't stupid, and her mother's didn't keep much from her. She knew that Emerald had once fought her family, extended and otherwise. She maybe didn't understand just how fiercely they had been against each other - the lives ruined by their conflict. She did understand that Emerald regretted the whole thing, and had long since been forgiven by the people she had tried more than once to end.

If only Emerald could do the same.

Feeling a pressure on her side, Emerald finally noticed her young companion had been hugging her gently for the past several minutes. Not enough to rouse her from her thoughts, but rather give comfort and stability to them.

So warm.

"You are way too good at that, you know. No kid should be able to tell the exact hugs to give. Means they have way too much practice." Emerald shared with a hug all her own.

"Mom taught me." she returned as if it answered everything.

Knowing Ruby, she has six binders full of types of hugs. Kept right next to her Binder of Birthday Plans, vol 3. A laugh escaped at a thought of all the binders bearing the Schnee logo scribbled over with a rose. Might explain why Mrs. Schnee seems to keep the supply room so secure, and they call me 'The Thief'.
"Where'd they go this time? It wasn't Grimm, mother took her nice boots. And momma packed her big hair brush." Jei broke her out of the reverie again.

"Not Grimm this time, no. They're actually going to try and find my old partner, Mercury. -" 

"is he the one you always call weird names?"

"- Yes, Mercury is the one I'm always calling names. If you ever meet him I'm sure you'll agree with me that he's at the very least, a flapjack." mirth at the thought of Mercury getting insulted by the little eight year old flowed from Emerald.

"I hope they find him. You bring him up sometimes, were you friends? Did he fight my moms too? What was his weapon? Did he even fight? - " curiosity seemed to flow out of her like a burst dam. Each question bringing back a familiar pressure behind Emerald's eyes.

Leaning back into the couch, she let the memories come now. No mental walls to stop them. They flashed by, being searched for things far too heinous to show the pure soul beside her.

_That one._

"Tell you what. Instead of answering a bunch of questions like you're trying to find me a date; I'll just show you? But you have to go to bed afterwards." A deal for the ages, and one that never failed to excite Jei no matter how often it was offered. "They probably won't be back till morning, anyway. Go get ready for bed and I'll get ready."

Emerald had little use for her semblance most days, but years of practice had grown it past its former limitations. Into something that could tell a bedtime story like no book or movie ever could. Memories were stranger, she had only her own vision to work with - leaving holes and gaps to be filled in with patchwork information or wild imaginings.

She was glad to use it for something that brought joy, instead of pain like she once had.

As Jei re-entered the room, hair tied in an adorable ponytail and pajamas covered with a familiar set of weapons, Emerald had turned the room into her canvas.

"Ohhh, team JNPR tonight, what's the occasion? Planning a hot date?" the Artist teased as she painted the image of her old self standing near a shop window.

"My CFVY ones are dirty. And my RWBY ones are for summer."

"Ouch, third choice pajamas, don't tell Nora."

"She knows. But now I have to use a Magnhild toothbrush. She made me pinkie promise."

With a chuckle, Emerald finished setting her scene, and gave a bow to her audience of one. "Then without further ado, may I present: the Sustrai Player's proud performance of 'Prank Queen' a true story of love, passion, and exploding snowmen."

As the events unfolded, Emerald settled in next to Jei. Remembering the hours spent filling glasses of water to fill an entire hallway with them. Or trying to find a glue that didn't smell like glue. All in the name of getting Mercury confident or riles up enough to try for the ultimate prank target; Cinder.

She had been furious of course, but they weren't in the middle of anything at the time. Just waiting for the timeline to move forward. The pranks were ultimately harmless - mostly. By the end she
had even attempted a few of her own. They were pretty hit or miss, but fun just to see Cinder smile during the attempts. She still had pictures of Taurus with pink hair.

That had all led to one of the few hot hugs Emerald had ever received.

Soon it was over though, and the real world fell back into place.

A sleeping golden-haired faunus resting on the couch was gently carried to her bed.

Lights were turned off,

thermostats were adjusted,

windows were checked,

memories resurfaced,

and finally sleep was found.

The dreams were quiet things, about mundane events. Days spent with a group of people she dared to call friends only at her bravest. Lunches shared with a family of once-enemies. Hugs shared over the silliest things.

But each had something in common.

Emerald was warm.
What's worse than Baby Pictures?

Chapter Summary

That really does sound like some trashy road novel's protagonist.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Why me?”

“huh? Oh, I thought Ruby would have told you already. She's amazing when it comes to weapons
that she can take apart and study, but just can’t do a lot about students who create them on a
whim.”

Cinder currently found herself resting on a bench, breathing harder than she had in far too long. A
cold water bottle resting between her thighs as she recovered from the, honestly embarrassingly
light, practice fight.

Her sparring partner today was none other than a boisterous blonde that had once been something
of a rival to Cinder's once-loyal henchman Mercury. Yang Xiao Long was ever still a bombshell in
all meanings of the word. Though her once wild temper had drastically soothed itself since their
more rambunctious days.

Honestly she had never seen why those two had hated each other so much, but Cinder had been far
more occupied with her own vendettas to care.

Spite, much like beauty, was often in the eye of the beholder.

Cinder found the parallel funny enough to let out a small snort in between gasps for air. She
unfortunately caught the attention of her current company with the release of air.

“What? Think my little sister's lying to both of us? You have met the woman, right?” a practically
trademarked grin find its way onto her features - and a gentle elbow into Cinder's own ribs.

Finally recovering from what should have been a trivial warmup, Cinder finished her swig of water
and replaced the bottle into its wonderfully cooling home.

“No. I believe that part. I may be biased against her, but even I know she is honest to a fault. I used
it against her more than once - or did you forget what happened to that little village south of… I
honestly don't even remember if it was Vale or Vacuo anymore.” Cinder really hadn't payed
attention to where they were at the time. She supposed she should feel guilt at that, but what was
one village in a world she had been instrumental in trying to overturn.

“I meant why me, specifically? You probably met hundreds of Hunters with semblances akin to
mine. I'm sure any of them would have jumped at the chance to teach at the resurrected Beacon
academy. With less than half the baggage I no doubt bring.” she had been puzzling over the
question for weeks now. The answers she could come up with always involved some twisted
revenge scheme from the Huntress that had once been her foil at every turn.
Yang seemed to mull over the thought, though Cinder wondered if it was all for show. Surely the woman across from her had considered the same question for far longer.

“Ruby's always been a bit secretive about her reasons for things. Her plans are weirdly meticulous, but the details as to why she makes half of the calls she does aren't exactly clear.” A simple, but honest answer as far as Cinder could read the woman.

“Besides, I'm not the one she'd ask about stuff like this. Maybe some stuff to hammer out details - like how to design a temporary arm to allow for minimal recovery time without forming bad habits. Just for example.” Well that explained how quickly Cinder had adapted to the regained limb, and the strange resistances she felt using it on occasion.

With a smirk of recognition, Yang continued “Who knows, maybe she just likes you.”

“Oh yes, Ruby is most certainly planning some masterful working. Lying to loved ones about her secret, deep-rooted love for me; forged in the fires of passionate hatred, and tempered in years spent apart, wistfully staring at the moon on nights so surrounded by others yet so alone.”

ridiculous, we fought each other - literally in the mud on occasion. Disdain is possibly the nicest feeling either of us ever held for the other.

The response, at least, was met with a burst of raucous laughter. Which was contagious enough to elicit a snort from Cinder in return.

Breathing heavily - the spar didn't even make her do that. Yang slowly calmed from the outburst.

“Hehe… Yeah, not what I meant. She can be an oddball, but until I see her coming home wearing a new bracelet of yours; I'm just going to assume she's more likely to end up with a knife in her back instead.”

Bracelet? What on earth would I give her a- oh.

“Is that what that… Eclectic belt is? You four stuck that close?” Surprising, most Hunters didn't follow that tradition anymore; even if they all knew one or two who did. Ruby had always been rather focused on being a Huntress and stopping Cinder at every turn. Not that Cinder really paid attention to the girl's love life while attempting to kill her.

“Yup.” -ending with an audible pop of her lips- “Hunter Family, through and through. Even got a daughter in the upcoming class, because there's no way she'll fail initiation. Good chance you'll meet her way before classes start too!” A beaming smile lit up her face. Before a new emotion flashed across Yang's features. “Actually, that might be connected.”

Now Cinder really was confused. How would Ruby being a mother coincide with bringing her worst enemy back from their own personal hell?

Seeing the confusion, Yang attempted to clarify the thought. “See: Jei, that's our daughter's name, she's like - You know stories where the main character has like all these powers and it sounds like the writer just wanted them to be able to do everything? Bad fantasy movies and stuff, right? -” Cinder did know of them. The road could be boring and trashy novels were one of the few distractions she had from baby pictures.” - well Jei is actually one of those. Stupid right?”

oh no. This is going to be far worse than baby pictures. She going to tell me baby stories.

“Look I'm gonna ramble a bit because now you've got me talking about my little girl, but it might be the answer to your question, so this is on you now.” and ramble, she did.

“When we were talking about having a kid, we had to decide who the donors would be, me and
Ruby couldn't do it because… yeah, no. But we found out from the doctor that there could be three donors maximum, which was cool but then there'd be one left out. Ruby figured one of us had to carry the kid anyway… and long story short the kid ended up with heterochromia - one silver eye, one gold- and enough Schnee blood to have summoning as her semblance. Magic is weird, but you probably know that better than me.”

*That really does sound like some trashy road novel's protagonist. At least we know she can't be the one chosen to defeat the Evil Prince of Grimmalia or some nonsense. Her mother already fulfilled that destiny*

“But the weird thing is, she doesn't summon Grimm. Not like Weiss and Winter, anyway. She can pull parts of ones she's killed out and use em, like claws or the armor plates. And thinking out it, your semblance probably seems close enough to Ruby - guess it explains why she didn't tell me, too.”

That… well.

That made at least enough sense that Cinder could believe it.

Ruby really wasn't doing this for revenge. There was no ultimate plan to pull it all out from under Cinder. Give her a glimpse of the freedom and shove Cinder back into that inane little village.

At least not before the end of the school year.

That have Cinder time. Good. She could use that to her advantage.

The council was trying to get something to leverage Cinder with? Two could play that game.

Ruby really was still a fool, trusting Cinder with something as precious as her child.

Standing back up from the bench, Yang shook Cinder from her thoughts. Reminding her of why they were talking in the first place.

“But, before that, you've still gotta deal with me for another three hours of physical tortu-py. Yup, starting with another round of tire flips.” bounding off, Yang began to prepare the workout area for the activity. Playfully tossing both weighted tires like toys.

/Subtle, Xiao Long. Like you couldn't pop my head like a melon back when I was just shy of godhood. Not like I trust you either. Message received./

Cinder slumped before squaring her shoulders, and standing to face the road to recovery before her. It was going to suck getting back to something resembling fighting shape in just under three months.

But if it meant a chance at freedom, she would take the pain.

If it meant a chance to make Ruby feel even an ounce of the pain inflicted already, all the better then.

The years had dulled much. Where a fire of hatred burned once, a new pile of fuel now sat. The tinder was arranged, and new kindling was added with each day since she had received the fateful letter. The match was even struck already, the small flame just waiting to be introduced to its new home.

Cinder had felt the heat of hatred before, it had once raged within her like a storm. It had clawed at
her, left its scars.

Ruby had left scars too. Often more external.

"Don't pick at your scars" Cinder could hear the wisdom repeated, across many who had once held her respect.

Most of them were dead, or good as, now. Only a small few remained. They no longer held much of anything. One name might, however, be a good place to start.

Sustrai.

---

Cinder mused to herself as her muscles strained against the weight in front of her. Sweat pooling beneath her. Hair trying its best to fall into her face.

She could see herself in the mirrored wall. She looked like some kind of deranged beast while working the long-disused parts of her body.

At no point did she see the door opening, admitting a different blonde than the one who had left her just minutes before. His attention was squarely on her, but respectfully so.

His eyes saw the curves, sure, but didn't linger on them. His gaze traveled up her body, but more focused on her form than her form. That was how he noticed the slight lean to one side, a lean that began to multiply - dangerously so.

Cinder only truly noticed the floor rushing to meet her when it suddenly stopped doing so.

Then came the cramping in her right leg.

Before the pain had even begun to register, she felt a spreading energy across her body - then deeper. Her soul flared with power. Her body was sure there should be pain, but every part of her registered even better than normal.

As her mind churned away at the odd situation, she felt one thing particularly out of place. Namely a pair of hands.

On her leg.

Gently massaging where pain would have normally been.

This, of course, caused her to look at the hands. Then the body they were attached to. And eventually the face looking back at her.

"Are you Okay? I was coming in to tell you th-" was all he managed before a second voice sounded from the doorway, now being opened.

"Jaune! Is she in here? Yang said she'd probably stay later... than... She recommended." a bewildered Ruby Rose now stood. Taking in the scene before her.

Cinder sitting on the ground, in tight workout clothes, panting and covered in sweat.
Jaune, looking ruffled, holding Cinder's leg gently. Currently doing nothing to alleviate the situation by blushing madly.

“Bwa-hahaha! Oh man, You two should see the looks on your faces!” the silver-eyed woman managed between fits of laughter. Literally rolling on the floor of the gym. Having lost her ability to breathe, let alone stand.

“Ah-ha hahaha. J-Jaune, do you want me to leave you and Mrs. Arc alone? I can come b-bac-ah hahaha haha.”

Cinder should have been furious. Both at the man currently still holding her leg, and the woman giggling like a lunatic across the room.

But the good-natured laughter, not even directed at her own failure - but the situation - was infections. Soon all three of them were laughing at the absurdity.

Surely no one would actually think such an occurrence would be anything but happenstance. Even if it was what it looked like at a glance, who would believe the two involved had become so close in under a month.

As the laughter rang around the room; for the first time Cinder didn't wonder what she had done to deserve this moment. What possible malice could be hidden behind the Huntress’ mirth.

She just laughed because it was fun.

The furnace in her soul, though stuffed to the brim with the preparations for ignition, remained unlit another day.

Chapter End Notes

what's this? a scenebreak and a second, almost as long section to the chapter? impossible.

Comments and Kudos feed my soul almost as much as Bee Angst and Whiterose Fluff.
Revenge is Salty

Chapter Summary

Ruby had yet to see concrete proof sharks weren't just well-disguised grimm.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ruby Rose sat, and looked at the… Well. It was a penis. No denying that. One of her students, Thulian Carnation to be specific, had drawn a penis on the first assignment of the year.

Props on the confidence, Thulian. Don't expect any extra credit for quality though. Or to ever live it down when I show these to the whole class.

Ruby had been teaching for over a decade at this point, doodles of all sorts were to be expected - dicks just never went out of style. For the first time however, she had an assistant and one new to teaching at that. Ruby looked over to the woman in question, wondering if she had found any surprises of her own.

Cinder Fall was clearly bothered by something in front of her. Her brow was furrowed in what could be anything from confusion as to how to read the handwriting, to disgust at what the handwriting said. Clearly unwilling to ask for help on her first real task for the semester - not counting the various lesson planning sessions and practice over the past several months.

As Cinder's shoulder slumped ever so slightly, Ruby made a decision. It was a crafty plan, one which would require perfect timing to achieve her goals. One wrong word and half the school might become overrun by a strange amalgamation of six beowolves, two chimera, a kraken, three thunderhooves, and one shark.

Ruby had yet to see concrete proof sharks weren't just well-disguised grimm. Even if they left bodies when they died.

Cinder needed help, or at least a distraction. Ruby was all too willing to give both of those. Now to hope Cinder was feeling acclimated enough to accept it.

“So, Mrs. Arc” Ruby teased, as she had since the night in the gym. Cinder looked up with a flash of what was probably annoyance, towards the nickname or Ruby herself wasn't clear. “Going purely off the information gleaned from the exercise and their weapons of choice, what are your impressions of... Our, students?”

Cinder clearly wasn't expecting a question along those lines. She seemed honestly taken aback by the inclusion the students were not Ruby's alone. The reaction wasn't lost on the silver eyed teacher, who smiled in response - her best ‘yes I really said that’ smile.

Recovering, the amber eyed assistant took a moment to consider the actual content of the question, before a surprising answer found it way to the world.

“Beacon has clearly kept its reputation for being a school for the best and brightest. I may not grasp the intricacies of more static weaponry, but I have seen enough questionable choices to know
a good idea from a clearly bad one.” Ruby could certainly understand, Cinder had known Arthur Watts - a man infamous for his frankly insane ideas for all forms of technology.

One project the authorities had recovered from his various labs was a ‘living’ weapon intended to *eat* in order to repair and evolve. Though the plans originally called for Grimm, it seemed he quickly dismissed the idea - lucky for everyone involved. Another stroke of luck came when it was discovered that exposure to air caused the entire binding structure to rapidly decompose.

Ruby had never been more interested in a military report, or more terrified.

“Take this, Kali Osha, for instance. A simple warhammer/shield duo, with three alternate shifts. Abandoning the protection of the shield, she can create a heavy waraxe. At range she can also use the hammer as some kind of small firearm; I honestly can't tell you what kind, firearms were always confusing to me. Then, given time to setup, can create an emplaced… Rather large weapon, again not my strong suit.” Cinder gave a good breakdown of the weapon, regardless of the missing information.

“Then, on her sorting, she seemed to take any weapon with less than three forms total and put them all into “Boring”, but seemingly re-wrote at least three weapons several times between both categories. She desires ingenuity and unique solutions, with little forethought to complications that may arise.” she finished the analysis with a searching look towards Ruby.

Grinning at the well thought out and succinct answer, Ruby felt the moment deserved some mischief. “Oh man, you really went for it. I mean, I agree with you. Good job there. But I was more thinking along the lines of ‘She talks too much in class’ or ‘If he really wants to be an artist, he should learn better *anatomy*’. But hey, if you want to get into the nitty-gritty, I can do that too.”

A beat passed. Just when Cinder seemed close to deciding if Ruby was serious or not, a playful wink tipped the scales. Both women gave small laughs, the mood not nearly so dour and stiff.

*Now for phase three of the ultimate plan:*

“But actually, that *was* really impressive. I know we've gone over some of this stuff the last few months, but I didn't expect you to catch on to the theory that fast. No offense, I just always thought you would lean more practical.” Honestly, Ruby had half expected Cinder's teaching style to involve throwing the children to the Grimm; or at least verbal abuse of some kind.

“But back to buisness: we're lucky these don't actually require a grade, there's not exactly wrong answers, just incomplete. Still, grading projects can really suck the fun out of anything. Blake used to help me out by making it a thought exercise, and my favorite one became kind of the central idea for this class. Maybe we can make this go quicker if we try one.” Cinder hesitantly nodded her approval.

*Oof, I barely even remember my first time grading stuff, must be rough if she's willing to put up with me this much today.*

“OK. So first: pick any student's weapon, the more random the selection the better. Kind of like you did with Kali's.”

"Second: Imagine you came across it in the wilderness somewhere: you don't have your normal stuff, so you've gotta use the weapon to survive."

"Third: If you can use it at all, what are the problems that come up after a fight? One day? One week? One month?"
"Fourth: Using the problems you can imagine, what can you do to prevent them in the first place?"

"And finally: What crazy thing can you do with that weapon specifically? The cooler the better, Blake used to say ‘impress your date with it’ cool.’"

“That is possibly the most you mind exercise I have ever heard. But I suppose it's worth it not to sit here in silence the whole time.” Ruby couldn't help but agree, it was very her.

That wasn't a ‘no’ though.

“I suppose, we could start with the next one in my pile: Polly Onyx, what's her weapon.

“twin axes with a grappling chain.”

“What was the next step? I find it in the wilderness? Hmm…”

---

“...Okay, I'll give you that the second whip could be used like a set of reins, but no way could you manage to not kill the grimm with the active edge…”

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“...This one is clearly based off yours. But they somehow made it…”

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“...a bit plain, yeah. But we've both been on the receiving end of several “plain” weapons…”

---

“...Requires incredible levels of Dustcraft, just holding it wrong might make most Hunter’s auras flare…”

---

“... And then she asked ‘Has that poster always been there?’…”

---

The conversation did make the grading feel faster, but several hours still passed by. Neither woman noticed however. So caught up in dumb stories and attempts to embarrass each other. Enemies came in all flavors, after all.

As Ruby rambled on about some new doohickey she was eagerly anticipating, she noticed a shadow find its way behind Cinder's chair. Quickly catching on, she schooled her features and continued on with only a slight verbal stumble.

“I love when she talks dirty about her weapons.” with an exceedingly loud yelp, Cinder shot from her seat. Ready to fight the unseen invader of her privacy, clearly she had let her guard down too quickly. Too easily fallen into the comfortable rhythm of conversation.
Blake, on the other hand, smiled far too sweetly. Then walked over to her giggling wife and shared a kiss. Short, but loving. “How's my lovely ladybug? Any students give you a hard first day?”

“Blake! What are you doing here? I thought you were gone ‘till next week.” Ruby practically squealed with delight as she wrapped the raven-haired faunus in a tight hug. Cinder was still standing halfway against the nearest wall. Likely still trying to breathe again.

Ruby found herself in a very similar state, though her reasons were much more positive.

“Got done early, the case practically wrapped itself in a bow after one of the detectives found a clue yesterday. I'll tell you all about it, after we pick up the rest of the Girls; I need some relaxation, and Weiss already brought the big limo to the landing pad.” She was audibly purring during the embrace.

Blake then managed to unlatch herself from Ruby, before turning towards the room's other inhabitant. Scanning the desks as she went. Her face was devoid of emotion as it fell upon the woman.

“Cinder.” oh no. “Thank you for helping Ruby with the assignments, normally that falls to me. And if she tries it on her own she'll be here all night.” a smile flashed across her face towards the silver eyed woman in question, “If you would like, I'm sure we could convince Jaune or Emerald to come along - turn this into a bit of a party. No pressure though, I know how hard these classes can hit the teachers.”

Aww. I didn't even think to invite Cinder. Not that I knew there was something to invite her to. I know your secrets Blake, you can't hide your sweet sugary side behind that black licorice facade of yours!

“C'mon, it'll be fun. Drinks are on us.” Blake egged, putting on her most trustable face.

Oh. That's just evil now. Meeting the students for the first time with a hangover? Truly Mrs Belladonna, you would have served Salem well in another life. Too bad I'm a certified Salem-stopping badass-

When did we get to a club? When did we get in the limo? When did we leave the classroom? Wait, I know this club! Crap.

Ruby took stock of the situation, which had apparently left her control… Well honestly it was likely never in her control since Blake, sneaky amazing hot ninja that she was, had appeared in the classroom.

Blake was currently sharing a mischievous grin with both Yang and Mercury - I should ask them how class went. Weiss had ordered drinks for the group, and was returning from the bar. Ren was speaking with- Oh! Penny made it, nice. Emerald seemed to be getting flirted at, unsuccessfully as far as Ruby could tell. That just left-

“HEYOOO PARTY PEOPLE! We've got a special treat for you all tonight! Seeing as it is karaoke night; give it up for our first song, by random lottery sung by J Arc and C Faaaaaaaalllll: Autumn's End! What a tearjerker of a duet.”

Guess that explains where Nora is. And isn't Autumn's End about the Fall of… Blake, you dastardly she-devil, I swear if you don't get this on video I will never scratch behind your ears again!
Ruby sat, and watched one of the cruelest, most hilarious pranks she may have ever seen unfold.

Tomorrow morning be damned, this night was going to be remembered forever, and Ruby wasn't missing a second of it.

Chapter End Notes

Yay, with that I've now gotten all four members of RWBY written in. They all sounds so different in my head, I hope it comes across in their speaking patterns.

Comments and Critiques are loved and accepted in this house.
Emerald was- is.

Emerald *is* worried. It's an active sort of worry.

About a lot of things.

Money isn't really one of those things these days. Food maybe, but more in a 'sticking to a diet' kind of way than actually lacking food. Ironic, she still remembered when the idea of purposefully not eating *anything* really was reserved those those things where ingesting it would leave you weaker than just continuing to starve. She hadn't had a run in with the beast of starvation in a very long time, but some monsters leave their scars regardless of aura.

Monsters like Marcus Black.

She had looked into him, several times actually, over the years. Any large-scale organization seemed to have something on the man; from past contracts to investigations surrounding the assassin. Emerald was likely one of a handful of people who knew more than just rumor and maybe one real account heard secondhand. Each story and report just filled in another terrible detail to the already horrendous painting that was Marcus’ life.

She only knew of one person in the world who knew more than her, and she swore she would never ask him. One of many promises they had made to each other. Not all of them in good faith. Not all of them kept.

Emerald liked to think she kept that promise, even if she had broken nearly all the others at some point. Even the ones about never eating Kale, and the promise not to rat each other out. Yet here she was, thinking about her diet, and directing a team of lawful huntresses where and how to get her old partner to listen.

She had spent the last several years hoping for this exact situation. She felt somewhat bad about the events surrounding it sure, but she knew the man well enough to know it wouldn't have ended any other way. If it had, one of them wouldn't be here. If one of them wasn't here, neither would the other be.

She was glad the two of them had long ago, another life practically, decided on a whole slew of code words. Everything from ‘your location was tortured out of me’ to ‘Magic shit happened, I'm from the future, don't ask’ had a phrase which confirmed with the other the situation.

Somehow they’d never seen the wisdom in making one for ‘I'm going to be a godparent’ but Emerald made due with its lesser version ‘family emergency’ which, ironically, wasn't code at all. Neither of them had a family, or expected to. But the trust the two held for each other still hadn't
dimmed over the years it seemed. It certainly hadn't for Emerald.

When Ruby had stepped through the door, bruised and scraped but beaming - Emerald nearly passed out from the emotions battling for dominance. When Yang crushed her in a bear hug that once been hot, now wonderfully warm, she actually might have.

The rest of that day was little more than a blur, as was most of the week. Worry and joy warred within Emerald's mind. She wanted to go fill the hopscotch-chalk of an ex-partner in immediately, on everything. They hadn't seen each other probably since Emerald had been offered a deal. A strange deal, that could only have come from one woman.

Still, she waited like a good law-abiding citizen. He was a criminal, he had to be checked for attitude and concealed weapons. She had been on that side of the desk when her own Amnesty had been offered. They had both played the waiting game for politics before.

Now, here she stood. Outside the interview room that contained the closest thing to a friend Emerald had, until about five years ago anyway. Now she had several friends, and was wearing a paper party hat at their recommendation.

Emerald felt silly, but also had yet to remove the festive cone from her head. Or drop the matching party horn in her hand. As goofy as she may have looked, the cheap accessories represented support from people who cared about her. People who had proven they wanted to help her be happy - Friends.

The same friends who had hunted the man behind the door for her sake. Who had promised not to escalate the situation upon meeting him, and been trusted with one of the few code phrases that might still hold weight to Mercury.

Emerald felt braver holding the small party favor than she did her own weapons - Rajah and Jasmine didn't exactly give off an aura of calm. The hat and horn also had the advantage of being impossible to weaponize, and thus were actually allowed by security. The bravery lasted up until she approached the door, and then quickly evaporated.

Do I knock? I don't remember anyone knocking on an interview room door before. If I just go in, will he try to attack? Should I brace for an attack anyway? He's here, and he knows I'm coming, would he really attack me? Should I try to use my semblance first? Would that show him I'm just generally jumpy, or that I'm scared of him?-

I wonder if he'd still remember the old code knocks, I barely do. Worst case he doesn't, I suppose. He remembered at least some of the phrases, may as well give it a shot. Emerald steeled herself, there was nothing to be afraid of. It was just Mercury. That stupid lime-licker.

Emerald knocked using the most recent pattern she remembered, but it had still been years since she last needed to check the security of a room this way. She waited, sure she had used an incorrect or long-replaced knock.

A reply sounded from the other side of the door. Equally as unsteady as her own. But she vaguely remembered the pattern. That would have to be good enough.
As Emerald Sustrai opened the door, a sense of familiarity came over Mercury; and an additional sense - the intrinsic need to tease her.

She looked good, healthy, maybe happy - or relieved. Completely ridiculous wearing a paper party hat, but good. Mercury was curious about what possible kind of ‘Family Emergency’ could ever involve him, especially after the way they had last parted. He wasn’t one to wait around to find out either.

“So, how's life been treating you since you went soft? See any good movies lately? Find someone special? Rob any poor old ladies? Wait. That last one doesn't quite fit.”

_That_ elicited a laugh from the dark-skinned ex-thief.

_Ice: Broken. Good to see her sense of humor has improved at least._

“Winter keep me, Merc, you absolute _Flapjack_. How long have you been saving that one? Since preschool?” Mercury felt like he should be offended by that name, but how could something so delicious ever be an insult?

“Homeschooling, remember? Between the regular beatings and emotional trauma, it was _all about_ how to quip.” Another laugh escaped, and met its partner.

It was good to see her again.

---

It was good to see him again.

It felt almost like the last several years had never passed. Maybe that was thanks to Mercury's insufferable humor. But things _had_ changed, mostly for the better for Emerald. Mercury however, was looking a bit thin. Not unhealthy or sick, but clearly stress was an every day issue.

Emerald hoped she could ease some of that stress. Hoped he would let her help.

The conversation continued as she thought and hoped, eventually leading to the Goliath in the room: “So, what kind of family emergency could you have, that you'd ever call me in to help with? Please tell me the birthday hat doesn't mean what I think it does.”

“Well. That's a bit of a story. But to answer the easy question: yes it is a baby, but no it's not mine.”

“Did you check?” His smirk was infuriating, and comforting.

“Shut _up_! No, I didn't check. Technically the kid's only a glimmer in their mommy's eye right now. But I was asked to be a godmother, and I'm scared I won't know what to do. I'm sure I'll mess it all up, and I needed help from someone who wouldn't leave me when I _do_ mess up. And they've been looking for you, to make you a deal, and I figured if you could get here sooner I wouldn't be nearly this-” She was rambling. She knew she was rambling, but Emerald was so worried she couldn't stop herself.

“Wow wow wow. Hold up. First off. Do you know what a godmother actually does?” Emerald thought about the question, before realizing she had been so worried about doing something wrong
that she had never actually learned what it was she would be doing. A slow shake of her head was all she could manage.

“You're basically just first in line to adopt the kid if the parents bite it. Maybe spoil the munchkin if you want, but that's not required. Who'd you say the parents were again?”

Emerald was- is- was.

Emerald was worried.

About a lot of things. Mercury being willing to help should never have been one of them.

Chapter End Notes

Yup. Emerald is still fun to write. I make all the art references with her.

Feedback? Comments? Know the Krabby Patty Secret Formula?
The comments are the place for you. Kudos are also welcome.
The Night Of:

Cinder Fall wanted to die.

*Autumn's End* was in no way a happy song. It was heart wrenching on a good day, even to Cinder who had considered the Fall of Beacon one of her greatest achievements. It was sung a duet; two victims of the attack trying their best to lift the spirits of the other and signal for help, while trying to hide the fact neither could be saved from the situation regardless of if help came. Truly it was the defining song of a generation. Against all odds here it was the architect of the event, and the one who had discovered the sad tale in real life - singing it together.

Sing was maybe a strong word. Cinder had downed quite a bit of liquid courage after it was clear she wouldn't get away from her tormentor without going on stage. If she thought Ruby could be a whirlwind, the orange-haired *monster* was nothing short of a monsoon.

Not only had Cinder somehow given in to the idea of joining her now-boss once-enemy, and her family, in a night of less than stellar foresight. Somehow the party had expanded to include a cornucopia of people she had once tried, and on a few occasions succeeded, to kill.

At least she could finally catch up with Emerald. It had only been a month since the disaster of a reunion last time. Maybe without the security checkpoint between them, Cinder wouldn't end up nearly arrested again. Though if she drank anymore - or had to sing again - ‘nearly arrested’ would be the minimum. At least she knew where Emerald stood in terms of loyalties these days.

*Of all the things I can't believe tonight, why is the fact I could hit that high note the one I'm stuck on?* Cinder truly couldn't get around the fact she still had *some* singing chops. The last time she'd sang would have been... Well her mother was still alive at the time, so at minimum thirty years.

“When did you learn to sing like that? Not that I’d assume you couldn't sing. Or could. We just, you know, fighting over the fate of civilization and life itself tends to not leave much time to learn each other's hobbies. It was good. You sang good-well. sang well.” The blonde man to her left stumbled over his words. From drink or nerves was hard for Cinder to discern, given her own inebriation.

From alcohol. *Nothing else*. Definitely not from being in the presence of such a well-chiseled jaw, frankly beautiful singing voice, and general confidence the man seemed to exude these days; present situation excluded of course. The alcohol was the *only* reason she would have such thoughts. Cinder was completely certain of that.

That damn village had been so very, very *dry*. 
“Another life… not literally of course, I'm not Ozpin.”

A small chuckle came from those beautiful lips. Cinder could feel an urge to move towards them. She squashed that particular train of thought with far less vigor than she might have hoped.

“I would hope not. Might make seeing Oscar pretty awkward. Making small talk with yourself sounds like a nightmare. Right up there with singing a karaoke duet on stage in front of people.”

“Oh, how about losing a limb? That's a big one for me. Never could quite figure out why though… maybe Xiao Long knows. Think she'd be willing to lend a hand? ” Neither one of them could keep a straight face at that. Despite having probably been a daily pun at some point, the joke was just stupid enough for their addled minds.

The giggles receded as a third existence joined the pair, causing both to straighten from the hunched laughter. Judging from the reaction she and Jaune shared, he didn't know the man either. His eyes were bloodshot, and he was clearly shaking with emotion. He very quickly moved towards her, arms out.

Cinder was halfway into a defensive throw when the hug finally breached her instincts. It was crushing, but not actually dangerous; even if she hadn't had an aura to activate. The man was lucky her hands hadn't been at an angle to form a weapon, honestly. Even if she didn't have the supplies to do so at the moment.

With a sniffling sob, the man clung to her like a Grappler. At least with grimm you know they want to kill you from the start. Cinder was not the hugging, consoling type. She was beginning to wonder just why he was being so clingy, she'd certainly never met the man before. The length of the hug was starting to border on incredibly uncomfortable when the man finally seemed to find his voice.

“*hic* T-thank you so much. I-I-I, thank you. You have no idea how much it means to me, ev-every time someone sings that song. Especially as beautiful as you just did. It… Really means a lot that, even if you didn't know her personally, that people remember Forest.”

“Uhh. Excuse me? Who are you? Apologies, should I know?” she asked as she finally extracted herself from the grasp. Cinder was not normally one to tolerate intrusions like this, but she was honestly curious. No one had ever thanked her for singing. She found she didn't hate the warmth it brought her.

“Oh, I'm so sorry. No, you probably wouldn't know. I'm Dale, Dale Grove. My older sister w-was Forest; she died during the Fall. Sh-... She's one of--she inspired Autumn's End.” Cinder felt like she had been dropped into a hive of Creeps.

“I'm sorry for this, really. I should be better about it after so long, but your voice really--it brought me back. So thank you, I know you probably just got roped into singing that, but thank you.” with a quick grasp of her shoulder, Dale smiled sadly and began back the way he had come. Leaving Cinder a bit overwhelmed at such a confession from a stranger.

She had met the victims of her crusade before, often times at the business end of their weapons. They were never very receptive towards the one who had orchestrated, or at the very least made to look like she had, the grief so many felt. That was back when the wounds were still relatively fresh though, fifteen-odd years was quite a while to hold a grudge; as Cinder could attest personally.

Her reverie was broken by another intrusion, this time a familiar face luckily. Emerald was certainly looking… exasperated. Annoyance was replaced by relief as she approached the pair. Her
shoulders were broader than they had been in their younger years, but maybe that was Cinder's lack of attention more than truth. Her makeup was simple, just some eyeliner and lipstick for the night - not that most with aura had blemishes to hide in the first place, none that weren't scars anyway.

A glance over the woman’s shoulder gave some indication as to what had been troubling her. Though he had a strong set of features: light-ginger hair, naturally chiseled jaw, wide shoulders, perfect height to-

No. Bad Cinder. You're far better than this. Have some damn dignity woman! At least she could tell it wasn't just the blonde man, Cinder just had a type. A small relief, if she was being honest. Not that Arc was a bad looking fellow, just maybe not the best choice for a first attempt in over a decade. Anything between them would either end in an inferno of a one night stand, leading to a very awkward semester (and intensified teasing by their coworkers); or something longer term, and also being teased by their coworkers.

Emerald clearly had no interest in him, the look in her eyes when she had learned he had followed her said as much. Maybe Cinder could help out a friend, and deal with the little voice in her head all at once. See? I can be a good friend... when I benefit from it. Nothing wrong with a little pragmatism.

“Emerald! So good to see you. I'm sorry about how last time went, but I guess a surprise visit may not be the smartest when you've had a criminal record as extensive as mine.” a short, culturally polite hug was shared between the women. Followed by a questioning expression directed behind the darker-skinned of the two. A roll of the eyes and a small motion of assent was the reply.

“G-great job on stage, Cinder. We really should catch up later, how's this Sunday sound? I know a great Cafe in downtown. Lunch?”

Brilliant. Now to steer the topic a bit…

“Sounds like a date. Speaking of, who is this lovely specimen? Is he with you?”

A deadpan expression was her first reply. “Wrong tree.”

Well, somethings don't change over the years. “Then let me throw him a bone, hm? Maybe get him to leave you alone. I'll need some payment of course.”

With that, Cinder claimed her prize - a beautifully strong cocktail - from Emerald's hands. Social lubricant was not the only kind she was likely to need tonight, but it was a good start. One she downed quickly before sashaying up to the target in question. Tonight deserved to be forgotten, or at least only remembered hazily.

“Well hello there. Sorry about my friend, she's-...”

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Cinder Fall wanted to die.

The splitting hangover was not playing well with the other aches and pains currently accompanying it, or the alarm currently blaring on the end table. The bed was certainly welcome, it was just as comfortable as her own. The empty space next to her, cooling but still warm, let her
piece together something of the events last night. A success, followed by several more if her nose was to be believed.

Another, much more pleasant smell finally pulled her from the blind inspection of her current haven of blankets. A good time, *and* a gentleman; *maybe one night hasn’t been enough*…

Her eyes cracked open, blearily looking at the fan above the bed. A small hint of familiarity crossed her mind - *probably just have similar taste*. But the more Cinder payed attention, the more the taste seemed to be *exactly* the same.

*Oh. Well, that certainly makes getting to work on time easier.*

Quickly taking the opportunity to prepare for a day in the classroom, she stumbled over a bra- *this isn't one of mine*- Cinder silenced her scroll's alarm before noticing the indent on the side of the bed opposite wasn't the correct size. Red, or whatever his name had been, was large sure. But nowhere near the size of…

“Cinder?” she heard called from her kitchen a voice belonging unmistakably to a blonde-haired Huntsman of world renown. “Do you keep any chives around? I don't need them, but they go well with the eggs.”

*Shit.*

Chapter End Notes

This fic was started out of an annual thing I do, usually with art during the holidays. my free time starts to dry up soon however. I won't leave it to die, as I really do enjoy writing it. but updates are likely to slow down a bit soon. My goal is once a week, maybe Wednesdays.

as always kudos and comments give me life.
The Morning After:

Ruby Rose was dead.

There was no other explanation, she had died during the campaign against Salem. The years of happiness and love were all her brain's last gift to a dying girl, a happy thought to bring through the veil in peace. Or maybe she was a sickly patient connected to a dozen machines, all blaring alarms at her caretakers because she was slipping into a world inspired by the other children; they were all superheroes with ironic twists on their disabilities.

Maybe one doctor thought she had Lupus. She smiled at the thought of a gruff senior doctor insisting it wasn't.

But lying here, surrounded by people she loved, tired from a night of frivolity and togetherness. Ruby was certain this was some form of afterlife.

She was thirsty, but not really hungover - Ruby hadn't had more than a hard cider last night. She had never really enjoyed the taste of alcohol, and after Uncle Qrow... she had no love for the substance. That didn't mean she would turn down a bottle or two if offered. That would just be rude. Tactless she may have been, but that was her own decision.

Her family knew her stance, they made it easier by crowning her as the Driver - even if they had a professional doing it for them most days. They were honestly The Best, big T and B. Even when they occasionally had to leave for jobs that took far too long to finish - even a full day was too long if you asked Ruby's opinion.

Not that any of them worked for the money - Weiss' non-liquid assets alone could let the next four generations of three families live comfortably, without even accounting for interest. The work they chose to take was something each of them felt needed doing. For Ruby that was making sure all the tools of hunting Grimm were as awesome as they could be.

It was the thought of her students which managed to drag her out of the wonderful pile which made up her dreams of an afterlife. As usual, she was among the first to wake up; the routine practically set in stone since her days as a student.

Wake up, start coffee, shower and hygiene, greet her sister and/or sister's partner depending on the day, get dressed, wake own partner, panic about the time, settle down, eat something, begin plans for the day.

It had evolved over the years to involve far more displays of affection, sure, but those spontaneous events were also the best part in Ruby's opinion. Even without them, Ruby was forever a morning
Cinder, evidently, was not a morning person. Or maybe she'd just partied a bit too hard, a limit nothing but experience could teach unfortunately. Ruby felt some responsibility for allowing the temptation in the first place, but if her memory served right Cinder was an adult who could make her own choices about moderation. She had left her share of damage on the woman, but she wasn't responsible for all of it. The giant dark glasses told just what kind of damage had been done.

“I blame you for this.” the glaring eye was practically glowing through the sunglasses. “How can you even be this alive after last night?”

That earned a laugh from Ruby. “I don't drink. And you can blame me for a lot Mrs Arc-” Ruby received something between a death glare and a blush for the joke this time, weird. “-but last night is all on you. Maybe Blake and Nora for the karaoke thing at the beginning, but the rest is all you. Now c’mon, we have to get ready for class to start.”

With that they spent some time going over the (mercifully simple) lesson plan, as most of the teaching would fall to Ruby who knew the entire year's like she knew Crescent Rose. Cinder really only needed to participate during the lab if one of the semblance-users volunteered, but was welcome to give her own additions to the lesson at any time.

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“Welcome back students, to my left is Ms Cinder Fall, those of you from the Vacuo regions might know her better by her title though: Maiden of the Glass-wastes.”

A few of the student's eyes shot open at the mention, with some questioning murmurs from those less in the know.

“Yes, much like Mr. Mercury ”The Butcher” Black from your combat class with my sister, Ms. Fall was once a well-known criminal element years ago. That she is here at all should tell you just how good she is, and how serious we here at Beacon take your education.”

A single hand raised from… Magenta, if Ruby remembered correctly. Ruby saw the pensive look and decided to assuage some of the more obvious fears. “She is the Semblance-weapon specialist joining me to assist those with situations where my own knowledge honestly falls short. While she is responsible for a variety of events, know that she is here as a personal favor to me and you should in respect her as such.”

“Moving on, today we will be covering a very important part of combat - Hunter Titles.” Several hands rose at that. “Yes, Titles are very important to proper combat and weapon integration for any Pro Hunter. But if you don't believe me, why don't we start with an exercise. We seem to have a good spread of students from all over this year, so we'll get a good example:”

“What is my Title? Specifically from your home region if possible. Excluding the simple stuff like
“Specialist-General Ruby Rose, the Witchhunter.” because one of those is a role, and the other everyone knows. Enter the name into your scroll and we'll display them on the board when you're done.”

As the students got to work, Ruby glanced at Cinder, trying to puzzle out the odd look on her face. She was studying Ruby, but not in her usual “trying to find all the weak points” way. It was like Cinder wasn't sure who she was looking at. A question for another time, probably. The timer she had set on the big screen was almost finished.

Of the Bloodstained Snow - The Harvest - Red Queen
Petal Bringer - Grimm Reaper - of The Shallows
Crimson Cloak - Clanbreaker - Distant Clap
Of the White Rose - Red Wolf - Red Plague
Moon-Mender - Moon-Minder - Dragonslayer

The list went on, even if the students had run out of answers to give.

“Good, you all have a good start here, all told you named eleven correctly. The full count last I checked is forty-eight unique Titles, with some repetition between regions; I am named Grimm Reaper in at least four very separate locations for instance, and am the eighteenth to hold the title in all.” Honestly it was impressive, most classes weren't diverse enough to get more than three or four outside of her well-knowns.

“However, ‘of the White Rose’ is not a Hunter Title; it's more of a Noble Title for my marriage to Weiss Schnee. Important, but not to this lesson.” Ruby was all for traditions, but any from the nonsensical jumble that was Atlasian Noble politics just sucked.

“Next, ‘of the Shallows’ is incomplete, it should be ‘Champion of The Shallows’ as The Shallows are a faunus traditional set of tests said to be impossible for a human to complete - that title is held by my sister, Yang.” She had been so excited the day she had been allowed to even try. Yang had barely slept the week leading up to the confirmation.

“And finally, ‘Moon-Mender’ and ‘Moon-Minder’ are both not mine, they belong to Coco Adel and her partner Velvet Scarlatina respectively.” Ruby still had never gotten that particular story out of them - all they ever told her when she asked was “Date Night” like it explained everything.

She removed the wrongly-attributed Titles from the main display. “Aside from those hiccups, this list is a good example for the lesson, namely: What can you tell about me just from this list?” Several hands raised, Ruby picked one at random. “Argo, go for it.”

“Umm, you wear red and use some kind of farm tool as your weapon?”

“Good try, both are true and relevant to this class. Important information to have if you're trying to identify me, But I mean something a bit less complex. How about you, Fuz?”

“You have something to do with flowers? Or, you travel a lot?”
“Oooh, so close. I do, in fact, relate to flowers. Some Titles can give hints as to identity and abilities, and were originally used as a way to know if you could trust an aura-unlocked individual before the Academies. If someone didn't have a Title they were either new to an area, or killed everyone who might name them.” all good guesses, but very few people ever got the point Ruby was trying to make.

“Put simply, the Formal Crier’s nightmare that is my full list tells everyone who knows more than one a single thing: Don't Fuck With Me.” a bit crude, but experience had left Ruby with the knowledge that the sudden outburst of profanity would stick in the student's minds that much better.

“Cinder, who was literally a legend from a fairy tale at one point, took public responsibility for the Fall of Beacon, and turned a wide swath of the Vacuo desert into a solid chunk of glass, among other things, only has one or two Titles to her name; they're powerful titles, but she tends to only be known in a few select locations that relate to them. The number of titles, and especially the type of title they are can tell you a lot about the Hunter in question. Up to, and including, just how dangerous they are.”

“However, this is primarily a weapons class, so we should focus more on that probably. What else can you tell about my weapon from the full list?” with that, Ruby displayed the full run of names attributed to her.

“I'll pick on you at random. So say the Title and what you can figure from it. Gandy, you first.”

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Ah lunchtime. Never change. Ruby was enjoying this new batch of students, every class held before the hour-long mealtime contained one or two inquisitive learners, with only a single pair of troublemakers regulated to the third period. That pair had quickly come under her new assistant's scrutiny, much to their dismay. Cinder was really on top of her game so far, she even added her own answers to the Title quiz and, surprisingly, taken over the scripted speaking for one of the periods.

“You did really good for a first try. Only big slip I noticed was when Rodd asked about your eye, and I don't blame you for that in the slightest.” Honestly, the Golden family had never been the most tactful of people, Blake had been close to physically attacking the last member to apply to Beacon, Leif, after less than two minutes in the same room a few years back. Cinder had toughed it out too, only threw a vitriolic comment about the boy's ugly mug after the bell rang.

As her head rested on the table in relief, Cinder turned her head towards Ruby. “How in the world do you do it? I can't possibly imagine how you manage to not strangle at least one child a day. Even the polite ones can take forever to actually answer a question.” That was a question worth answering.

“Oh girl, my dude, I have wanted to introduce several of my students to the business end of your younger self so many times. But to answer your question, well the quickest way is to take a closer look at that list of Titles, right around the end. Starts with a G, doesn't quite fit the rest of them.” Cinder looked quizzical for a moment before shrugging and beginning her search.

It was a small title, compared to the others. It had nothing to do with Ruby's appearance or skills. It
wasn't violent or cool. But to everyone who knew the Woman, it was among the most important.

“Gravekeeper. It's the only one that's just a normal job.”

“That's the one.” a somber mood fell over the two women as Ruby's normal cheerfulness dimmed.

“T'm not sure I understand, plenty of your Titles have death imagery, why is this one so special?”

“But it's not a correct translation. It's actually word from the old inhabitants of Patch, before they made contact with the greater Sanus tribes, long before even the kingdom of Vale. It means “One who Guards the Death-marks” but because it's a dead language, it's just translated.” As she explained, she removed several of the pouches from her belt. Opening each and carefully spreading their contents across her desk.

They were coins.

Each one bearing a unique symbol on their face, and a small inscription on the reverse. Several were the same metal, but they made up a rainbow of colors and materials all the same.

“These are…” Cinder looked at several up close, carefully lifting them as if they would shatter at the slightest touch. “... Names, dates, and insignias. These are tombstones.”

Ruby Rose wasn't dead.

Not yet.

While she was alive, all those who were would be remembered. At least a little bit. Not everyone got to see the happy ending they fought for in person, but maybe they saw it through her. Ruby just hoped that was enough.

Chapter End Notes

This is actually the first chapter I had to cut short. I ended up going on a bit of a character rant. it honestly should have been another 500 words or so, but the tone didn't fit the tone well enough.

Happy 2019 y'all

Please, Feedback of all kinds is welcome.
Ms. Sustrai’s strange family reunion

Chapter Summary

Onwards, to the ravishing!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Night Of:

Emerald didn't date.

Not often anyway. Never for more than a date or two when she did. It wasn't that the people she met, or was introduced to, were bad matches. There were a few who were mean or pushy, domineering maybe, but that was almost a plus for Emerald. She could admit that she was not one to be in control, maybe share it with another; but never the leader of any group really.

Emerald was a good lieutenant. Put her just below the position of true power and she could navigate the hurdles for someone else, throwing their weight around for them. She wasn't against being in charge of something, but she did not appreciate being the top dog. In both professional and personal situations. It just wasn't her style.

Still, there was a fine line between “dominant” and “possessive”, she had lived beneath both to varying degrees in her life. Her mother had been controlling, but loving. Salem was literally attempting to be seen as a god; Emerald wasn't sure if there was a word for that specifically, deific? Taurus was definitely possessive, though she had never lived under his influence, he was at minimum her equal for a while.

Cinder had been… well according to Emerald's therapist, she had been emotionally manipulative at the least. Downright abusive was probably more accurate though.

If Emerald was being honest with herself, she still felt the urge to find a relationship like that again. It had begun as a power imbalance when Cinder had found her on the streets and made her for a thief, blackmail of a sort. It had grown from there to something of a student/mentor situation; still unhealthy by polite society's standards, but infinitely easier to brush off at a glance. Then there had been the subtle shift towards a more familial involvement, forged on the road and tempered in blood. Eventually it had shifted again to a bond of longing and grief, easy to do when you spent nearly a month thinking your mother figure was dead. The relief Emerald had felt when she learned Cinder was alive had been what she now recognized as the start or another shift in her feelings.

Emerald had wanted nothing more than to run away from the whole thing and settle down somewhere. Be safe and surrounded by those she didn't want to see hurt. Mercury too, she supposed. But Cinder wasn't the kind to just hide from the world like that, she had waded into the thick of the war once more. Emerald wasn't about to let her family risk their lives without her there to at least try and save them should the chance come, so if course she followed them back in herself.

Just as quickly as the whole thing had started, it was done. Salem wasn't in control, Cinder wasn't a
threat, and the world was safe - relatively speaking, anyway. Then Cinder was whisked away, Mercury and Emerald bolted from the sure-to-come recompense for their parts in the whole situation. Years later her new family had found one of her safe houses, and offered her a strange and perfect deal: settle down somewhere safe, and surround yourself with people you don't want to see hurt. The only kicker was that she was only the first, they were still looking for the rest.

Emerald's family was bigger now, but the founding members were back too! Mercury was certainly like a brother to her - annoying and a bit of an emotional souffle, but she felt better with him close. Cinder was… Not the Cinder Emerald had known last. She was calmer, less demanding, but still retained her drive. Her ability to set her sights on something and act to obtain it. An ability currently turned towards an annoying crimson-themed man who had been something like a tumor on Emerald's night.

If Emerald had a type, it was essentially the man's complete opposite. He was soft, not in a lacking muscle sort of way, he clearly had never truly left the city. His skin was pristine, his body unmarred by a life spent away from moisturizers. He hadn't demanded her time, just hung around trying to catch her eye. His hair was too neon. His shoulders too broad. His… Well, his' ness was certainly a factor, but it wasn't a true deal breaker to Emerald.

Note to self: still a hell of a lightweight. Don't let the robot convince you otherwise. Penny had likely meant well, making sure she wasn't going to get sick from the amount of alcohol and providing water between each drink. That didn't mean her supercomputer brain turned towards getting them all “Party-Ready”, or as Blake so sluringly put it “Hella Turnt”, in the most efficient way possible was healthy.

Still, somehow Jaune and Cinder had both ended up coming back to her. The company was, she couldn't say good given all three had at least some criminal record, but it was fun at least. The feeling of being herself again was back, not that she was coherent enough to really think about anything more than the warmth flowing off of Cinder; even from a distance.

It felt… nice, even when Mercury had stumbled out the door with somebody-even after all this time, and alcohol, he was more likely to walk away from a mugging with more money than he walked into it with. Emerald was far from worried for his safety, even if he hadn't had aura to protect him.

Her family was still here, still near her. Even if some weren't here. They were all safe, and happy; or at least not being hunted or held prisoner.
They even mostly got along with each other! Though Jaune and Cinder had been pranked by the first karaoke song of the night, it was by no means the last. Everyone had been up on that stage tonight. From classics like Grimm Gambol to more modern stuff like– ohh, what was it? I swear I know the name of that song. What's it sound? Dun-dun-dee dee-hmm-HMM-MMmm, by uhhh… --

“Jaune! Hey Jaune. Whas that song? That uhh, that Weiss wasinging? The really happy one? Withe the moon or something.”


Yes! I knew he'd know. I need to write that down or something, now where's my…-- Cinder seemed to know what was going through her head, or had been holding Emerald's scroll out to her for a while. It wasn't her place to question-- no. I'm drunk. Not an idiot. I'm a valuable person. I have worth. This isn't some seedy warehouse. I'm-- Emerald was cut off by a pair of arms wrapping around her shoulders.

“Mmm, just the right size.” Cinder was clearly past the point of no return. It would probably be a good idea to end the night before someone started dancing on a table or woke up slumped over in vomit.

Ren and Nora would likely close the night out with the staff and be no worse for wear. Ruby as usual was near-completely sober, but she was having such a good time with her family back together that Emerald didn't want to break up their night. Penny was… Apparently leading some kind of dance out on the floor, and it wasn't The Paladin. That just left herself, Jaune and Cinder ready to call it a night, or at least willing to.

“Alright, Jaune. I think Cinder's waaay too deep. drink. Drink? Dunk. I'm done. Cinder's started hugging. I don't know where she lives. Lend me a hand?” Nodding his understanding, the two helped the woman from their booth as she giggled and cling to both of them.

“Ohhh. My heroes! Hee! So strong. Yes, carry me from this vile dungeon! Onwards, to the ravishing!”

I don't think I've ever seen here this bad. Penny really is dangerous.

“Alright. Em, can you- thanks. Maybe if we, uhh. I'll get the door.” Emerald had maneuvered so that she was supporting cinder alone. Jaune was trying, but if he was even close to Cinder’s level of intoxication it was probably good all three of them didn't fall at once.

“Emmmmeraaaaald. I don't wanna walk. Carry me!” Still clinging tightly to her neck, that left very few options. Princess? Not for any walk more than a few yards. Fireman? Not in the skirt Cinder was wearing. Piggyback? Similar issue to fireman, but far easier to balance at least.

Piggyback it is. She was lighter than some of the weights Emerald used for endurance runs at least, and much warmer.

After getting situated with jackets, purses, and bodies. They set out to say their goodbyes and get the hell outta’ dodge. Weiss insisted she cover the entire night - not that any of them had assumed otherwise after being picked up by a limo. Blake and Yang were distracted by some conversation they had been having and only offered a passing farewell. Ruby offered to get them all home, but there was no way Emerald would even let her consider it.

“Lead the way Jaune!”
“Cinder. Keys. Where?”

They had traded carrying the woman. Emerald had gotten her to the Shyp, while Jaune handled getting her to the apartment. Which also left Emerald to unlock the door, and try very hard not to look at the nuzzling going on behind her- or notice just how less herself she felt. She was still a bit addled, but was at least aware enough to notice a pang of envy? Jealousy? Hunger? It was a pang of something, but she was still too clouded to tell what it was. The occasional hand brushing across her arm wasn't helping.

“Mhmhm… It's a seeecret. To prote-c-t my delicate self from, big strong bandits . Heheheha!”

Great. She's frisky and drunk now.

Searching through Cinder's purse proved to be fruitful relatively quickly. Her keys were attached to a downright adorable little grimm keychain; it looked like a pudgy little ursa.

*Cinder Maul, clearly a fearsome protector of fair maidens and slayer of guests.*

While she laughed at her own mental pun, Emerald managed to open the door and fight the lights. It was, bare-- *or bear*-- of most decoration, but it looked lived in. The bookshelf was mostly empty, but a few paper sentinels stood watch above a shelf of trinkets and what had definitely been housewarming gifts. No plants anywhere, but Cinder had never had a green thumb.

Jaune had let cinder down once they had crossed the threshold, but didn't leave afterwards - Cinder made sure of that with a closed door and a smolder that made Emerald wonder if she had even lost her connection to the Fall Maiden. Jaune was less than clear-headed, but certainly seemed fine with it if the resulting kiss was anything to go by.

Emerald was left stunned in place, and remained so until a wonderful heat found itself pressing against her own lips. She wasn't exactly sure what happened next, but she had a hard time denying her smile.

Maybe a lunch date wasn't enough. Maybe a date would be though.

Now she *really* needed to make those reservations.

Chapter End Notes

This one took a while. Emerald is really fun to write but I really have to work into her headspace. not to mention clearly conveying a drunken chortle in the middle of a sentence is surprisingly hard while keeping the character's voice consistent.

Feedback is loved and acknowledged
Chapter Summary

hatred is for teenagers and those who refuse to grow past it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ruby Rose was, well, an oddity to be sure.

She was an optimist, but no longer naive as she had once been. She had a family, but chose to continue working near danger. She had access to an honestly insane level of wealth, but still worked a demanding position. She also, apparently, carried around a set of coins which made stand-ins for tombstones.

“I mean, more or less tombstones, I won't bother you with the Patchian name. Each one is from someone who died, or given to me by their friends.” some weren't strictly friends if Cinder read these names correctly. Her collection included several enemies as well. “Here, this one is Roman Torchwick. And this one is the original Penny Polendina.” Ruby knew those two would be relevant to Cinder, she likely wouldn't know the names of those less involved in their years-long struggle.

“So, how does this answer my question? It's certainly a strange kind of impressive. A bit macabre too, being honest. But how does” Cinder gestured at the displayed collection “this explain how you manage to deal with everything and not have a bottle hidden in your desk.”

“Because every one of these coins is a story that never got to see its happy ending. Some were Grimm, some were stupidity or just plain disease, some were you. These kids are still working on puberty, so as much as I hope I'll never have to carry their coins - and because I met them there's a chance I might - every lesson that sticks with them and saves their asses is one less weight on my belt.”

“That's… Honestly I can't tell if it's selfish or noble.”

“Mostly selfish. Guilt and loss led me to some strange places, making the first coin helped me find my way out. It became just another routine eventually, helped to remind me just who was behind me; who had given everything they could.”

Cinder had a blank look on her face at that. She wasn't sure if she should be impressed at the apparent cynicism the ever optimistic woman apparently held, or annoyed that somehow she hadn't been the deciding factor in finally breaking the cheery outlook.

“I hate you, I've not made it any secret. You hate me too, I'm sure. So why do any of this? Why tell me you have a collection of mementos from dead comrades, some of which are dead because of me. Why offer me amnesty just to come here and torture you more than I already have? What possible reason could you have to still try and be remotely nice to me, after all this? I've asked your friends and family, they gave answers more informative about their own feelings. Which means you're either incredibly good at hiding your intention, or you don't know yourself.” Cinder was practically panting from her tirade. She had stood from her desk and leaned over it like a predator.
about to pounce.

Cinder Fall. You haven't changed a bit. It's been decades, and you still refuse to believe that someone can be nice for niceness' sake. That damnable village wasn't a prison, it was your time-out corner. You were sent to bed without dinner. Because even now, you can't help but throw a tantrum when the world is confusing.

Ruby hadn't even leaned back during the rant. She had instead reached into her bag and removed what appeared to be a heated container for food. She leaned calmly at her desk as she waited for Cinder to calm down a bit.

“Well, before we get down to the meat of… that. My ever-loving family packed more than enough food for an entire team of students, let alone just me. Would you care to join me for some-” she opened the cooler and foil, looking inquisitively at their contents. “-Ohhh, Weiss made fajitas; chicken, and fish too! Man, you'd think they know me or something.”

She chuckled a bit at her own joke, before turning her attention back to Cinder. “So, Want some? I always have extra in case a student or two wants to use the ‘benches during the period. You're more than welcome to head over the cafeteria if you like. I won't be offended, just stuffed.”

Infuriating. That was the word that encapsulated everything Ruby Rose was. She somehow took the most stressful, in-your-face moments and worked through them like she was… born… into… them.

Fuck.

Cinder was, more or less, the driving force behind her greatest enemy. Her actions had catalyzed the schoolgirl from naive freshmen, two years out of place; into the terror which haunted her dreams even over the literal immortal queen of the Grimm. Sure, maybe the desire to stop Cinder had come from another source, but her decisions and plans had been what Ruby had worked to stop.

Cinder's epiphany that she had created, and then utterly failed to destroy, her own worst enemy. It maybe broke something inside of her. Some small shred of resistance to this whole crazy situation was finally ripped away like a bandage improperly applied, and finally being checked over by a trained eye. Ruby Rose was Cinder's foil because she had been forced to be so, or die.

“Well. If I can read your face as well as I think, I owe a few people money. Have some of the fish, we have this amazing seasoning mix from Menagerie.” Ruby slid a package of foil - cute - over.

“I'm going to guess you just figured through why I owe you a bit too. In a pretty loose sense of the word.”

Owe me? For what, leading her down a road to war in the middle of puberty?

“You, Cinder Fall, are one of many reasons I am who I am today. You did some heinous things, killed several of my friends; usually right in front of me. Killed plenty more people I can't even count or pretend to name. Really it was mostly killing. There's some semblance of stealing in there too, but that's not exactly connected. I don't think you've raped, pillaged, or plundered per-se, but you did take out a warship or two.” Ruby was calmly eating her food, almost playfully twisting in her chair as she listed off a seriously long list of crimes and acts that should have led Cinder to some kind of permanent end.

“But to answer your question. No. I don't hate you. I did once, but that was years ago. I was
hormonal and stubborn and angry and scared. I definitely hated you, back then. But I also hated my mom for being dead, and classes for being on Mondays, and peanut butter cookies for being filthy liars. You've hated me for, what, Twenty years? Hows that working out for you? Jaune was the same way, trying to kill you for like, a year. Didn't lead him good places, just straight into self destruction. Multiply that and, I guess we end up right here. Point is, hatred is for teenagers and those who refuse to grow past it.”

Cinder was not expecting this kind of roast if she was being honest. Ruby had never seemed the type to have a speech like this ready. She had readily shared her food before though, back at beacon.

It was a team-leader-only workshop in the woods, survival or team building or some other nonsense. Cinder had tried her hardest to get out of the pointless waste of time, but it had been mandatory for all team leaders; regardless of broken bones, sickness, or class. So naturally, she had failed to pack adequate food for the two day event, due to the last minute nature of her scramble. Ruby had shared a pitiful offering of Oatmeal and scavenged berries for breakfast, followed by a collective feast made from the remaining food from the rest of the attendees for the final lunch of the trip.

She had apparently never grown out of the habit. Cinder had also never grown out of the habit of needing food to survive. Terrible fate, really.

“Now, as for the rest of it. That's pretty easy” Ruby continued between bites of her own tortilla-wrapped fish. “None of this is about me. Or you. Not really anyway. We're just the best ones for the job.” Bite, chew, swallow.

“Kids need training, you and me and the rest of the staff are the best of the best.” Bite, chew, swallow. “Doesn't matter if we hated each other or been invited for the wedding, it's not about us anymore.” Cinder finally worked up the nerve to eat the food offered. It was delightfully spicy, with a pleasant lemon zing, and a scattering of onions, mushrooms and peppers in separate containers, should she choose to add them. She might need to get the recipe. Her decorating skills may have been lacking, but cooking? That she could do.

“You and me. We're living our ‘Happily Ever After.’ Unfortunately, yours didn't sound very happy. These students though? The generation they represent? They haven't even reached ‘Upon’ yet. So it’s our job to make sure they're ready once their stories really start. Also, for the record, it was partly Blake's idea. It's hard to forgive the things you've done, and I don't think I can ever forget that you did them. But holding onto that doesn't help me, or you, or the students.” Ruby clearly believed that. She had likely made a similar speech to Mercury and Emerald. So, with her point seemingly made, she returned to the food in front of her with a gusto someone a third her age might devour ice cream.

Cinder then, was left in the lurch. Or ‘left in the lunch ’... Dear Salem, I'm becoming Xiao Long. The food was delicious and filling. Though problematically, she still felt a pit in her stomach after finishing what was more than enough for one sitting.

As the two spent time in food-induced silence. The door to the classroom opened, allowing in a pair of students. A hulking faunus with white fur and an equally small boy with pinkish-silver hair. “Oh. Wuz, Pat, what can we help you with?” Ruby didn't miss a beat, bringing a bit of food with her as she moved to greet the two.

“Oh. Professor Rose. Thank you, but uhh, we need Ms. Fall's help. Sorry.”

“Not a problem at all. Why else do you think she's here? To eat all my study food? Well. Maybe a
little. But can you blame her? CINDER! c'mon over, these two need some semblance-ing”

The students were actually seeking out her help? She supposed it shouldn't have been surprising, but it was only the second day of classes. She had thought there would be some gap at least. With nothing actually keeping her from doing so, Cinder left her desk and empty foil package behind. “What can I help you with… Wuz?”

“um, yeah, Wuz. Short for Wuzseir. You had my younger brother Fusson earlier. Most people call him Fuz. Behind me is my partner, Patrun; team Periwinkle. We're second-years. When we took this class, Mrs. Rose didn't have anyone who could help me out with my weapon, but I managed some improvements with the Catalog and watching recordings. But I heard there was someone this year and I could really use it. See, I've gotta grow my weapons from wood, and I can do that easy enough when I'm… “ he continued on, leaving Cinder to think about both how to solve his problems and her own issues with the woman happily munching on some pastry back at her desk.

The revelation of how Ruby felt was… enlightening. The woman had clearly spent time and energy coming to terms with working with people she didn't see eye to eye with. She had made a decent argument too, the future of the population depended on these students being good enough to solve the problem of Grimm.

But left Cinder with a very important question still: Why would she even care about the next generation at all?

She held no stake in their wellbeing. Had no children, or friends with them. She didn't have a tie to the world after her death except in the form of a chunk of melted sand on another continent.

Cinder wasn't an idiot, she wasn't going to spend her days ruining the world for them-At least not anymore -But she had no real reason to help them. She was only here, in this classroom, because the other options the Deal offered were the ‘death’ equivalent in ‘cake or death?’.

Maybe she could learn to care about the students, but that would take time. Until then, Cinder would be operating under the fear of getting sent back to her corner while she tried to do something she had never managed in her life. Even for herself, being honest.

Cinder Fall would have to love.

She was terrified. Also relaxingly well fed. Maybe a little cold; she would bring a jacket tomorrow.

But mostly terrified.

Chapter End Notes

Nothing new to report. Cinder is an interesting character. I hope I didn't get too exposition-y
I might add a second fic called "exposition would have been preferrable" to just explain some background stuff, if that's a thing people want.

As always, I love you, please yell at me in the comments so I know how much that
creeps you out.
Ruby Rose was a hypocrite.

She could admit that. There were plenty of people who could call her out on that fact too. She had met more than enough in her life to have contradicted herself with more than one of them. But she tried her hardest to be straightforward and honest in her ideals.


Those were the basic rules of being a Ruby Rose. Even just listing them, she could see where she might fall short on a few of them. But they were ideals not reasonables, to strive for them was the point.

They had changed and evolved, as her experiences had forced them to. Still, she held true to as many as she could. A few of them had bitten her in the butt over the years, and contradicted each other on more than a handful of occasions.

The worst was when “help” and “be kind” clashed. Because some help wasn’t kind, and kindness didn’t help everyone. Cinder Fall was living proof of the former. To give her another chance was hard, but to take away that chance entirely was… Wrong.

Killing never made the world better; At best it just removed the chance for someone to make it worse. Sometimes that’s all you anyone could reasonably hope for. Ruby Rose didn’t have an ideal for “be reasonable.”

To help Cinder Fall, however, Ruby couldn’t be kind. Cinder required someone to destroy her down to the basic level of her beliefs. From that point, she could be assisted in rebuilding. This time with a better foundation than her previous self had ever known. One made up of those around her, not just anger and fear. It would take time to chip away at the leftover rubble, and Cinder had to be the one to rebuild for the most part.

The conversation earlier in the week hadn’t toppled Cinder’s fortress of self. it wasn’t a strategically placed set of charges meant to cause the supports to crumble and give way. It was a bomb, a pretty big bomb that would cause instability and compound damage already done; What it wasn’t, was an endgame. That would take time, and mostly just hard work. Like fighting a Goliath, there wasn’t one glorious moment of victory, just carving away bit by bit until the massive grimm just dissolved as it continued moving forward.

Maybe Ruby was being egotistical, thinking she knew what Cinder needed. Forcing her own view on another was far from a kind thing to do, even on a good day it was pretty morally grey. The future lives of her students rested on Cinder’s ability to let them in, however; as did Cinder’s own.
So, maybe Ruby would top the hatred list again; she could live with that. She'd done it before, and she would do it again if it meant one less name written on a placard attached to a memorial.

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Luckily, today Ruby was a hypocrite for a very different reason. Today was Thursday, and that meant it was the best day.

Ruby never held class on Thursday, the time was instead devoted to weekly workshops and internships held by the students. Jobs and leisure time too, should they chose. Professor Rose, eccentric world-renowned hero that she was—along with Professor Xiao Long, were never available for any reason for the entire duration of a Thursday.

Now, several people who hadn’t known her for more than a week had wondered why exactly Thursday was such a wonderful day. She could be having a week from hell on Wednesday, she would disappear for a day, and then by Friday she was facing down whatever problems arose like they were Graspers in the desert. *Completely hilarious to watch try and kill you.* The answer was simple, readily answered, and easily discernible with even a little bit of brain power put towards finding it.

Thursday was family time.

It had originally been “date night” back when the group of them had first attended beacon as students. Not that they were dating back then, it would be years still until the first of them realized their feelings. The name had begun as a dumb, off-hand joke from Nora and stuck forever.

Somehow it was decided that Thursdays were the day to travel into Vale or the Forever Fall and spend time either as a team or in some form of grouping together, away from the school and the future of hunting Grimm. Maybe Weiss and Blake would go shopping, or herself and Yang would drag the other to a movie that needed to be seen with another to truly appreciate how bad it was.

That’s what it had started as, just being together. After the Fall of Beacon, each of them had been forced away from that life, but the habits of it remained. For her part, every Thursday on the road as part of her temporary team, Ruby would habitually check her scroll for a certain group’s signals, before pulling together some kind of special meal for her current companions. While between settlements it wasn’t much, maybe an extra serving of meat or a drink they liked. The weekly event had helped to keep her from really falling apart, she needed that help a lot in those days.

Over time the tradition had remained. It had grow from “not dates” with friends, to actual dates eventually. Forever and always would Thursday be the time to spend together.

So, that usually meant that Wednesday night was a mess of last minute work or a frenzy of trying to make sure the next day would be open. Shoes rarely made it back into their correct place in the closet during the rush. But, even when one of their number was away, without fail they would put whatever else was happening on hold for each other; even if it was for a call from another kingdom.

Also without fail, Ruby was the first to awaken. The current state of the house was *not* organized. There were coats hanging over the sofa, coffee mugs in the sink, and shoes tossed aside in the rough direction of the door.
That of course, meant that the normally messy woman would start the morning by making sure everything was right where it should be. Ruby may have had her own system, but Weiss was not one for even a hairbrush out of place when she woke. The inability to find her coffee mug in time could throw off her entire daily rhythm, and had once lead to an Atlesian Cumulus-class cargo ship being literally flipped onto its dorsal in drydock.

As she cleaned, luckily not scrubbing sinks or wiping windows today, she would come across small signs of plans and gestures awaiting the others to wake. They weren't secret plans or anything, trying to have four people make plans separate from each other without some kind of communication just didn't work. The gifts and such were usually surprises though.

*Ohhh, looks like Blake's been trying to find a new part for… Gambol? No way a UG-1036 would fit anything but that. The UGx maybe, for Myrtanaster's chamber, but Weiss prefers the variable resistance of her UHk. I'll have to ask.*

*Ah, is that a reservation for tonight? Guess I won't have to worry about what to do after the boardwalk.*

*Hmm… what series is Blake reading this week? Ultranormal? Sheesh, feels like she picked that up back in our teens. How many books are there even?*

The time passed quickly, Ruby barely even noticed she was out of things to clean when Yang entered the room. Her hair was yet-unwashed and it's usual morning tangle still somehow looked like it came out of a magazine. InspiRushan seemed to be the band if the day according to her shirt. Their concerts weren't Ruby’s scene- or any concert really-, but the music was pretty good for working out.

To call her sister anything but amazing was lying. Not even a ‘she knows my favorite brand of shampoo changed’ amazing either; Yang looked amazing. It was hard to describe Ruby's feelings towards her sister, in that regard- Envy, certainly. Yang was sexy, objectively. Being half-sisters, and being raised together did mean Ruby didn't see her in the same light as she did, say, Weiss lounging across the couch in her nightgown- tired rings under her eyes and all.

*She is beauty. She is grace. She can s-*

“G'mornn…”

Yang, despite her flawless skin and luscious mane, was not a morning person. Her normal sunny demeanor and social awareness just didn't exist before coffee. *Podoby's Nerfect.*

“Heh, ‘nerfect’. Mornin’ Sis! Your deathtrap's already going.” Ruby “yelled” at a morning-appropriate volume, standing from the couch as she did so. Deathtrap was really the only word for it, and Ruby regularly worked with volatile explosives.

“Mmm.. Your th’ best Rubes. Shower's heatin’ up.” the shambling golden corpse managed on her way to the strange setup of glass flasks and burners currently working its way to a boil. How she managed to operate the whole system while unable to have more than half an eye open was a mystery for the ages. The shower awaited, however, and Ruby left the legend of Yang’s alchemy for another time.

As she entered the hall, a certain black haired faunus exited, carrying two hairbrushes and a fresh towel. She gave the towel to Ruby, for the low price of a good morning hug and headbutt; the light peck on her ear was just gratuity. After they had passed, Blake made her way towards the smells of chemistry and caffeine, leaving Ruby to finish her journey to the cleansing waters.
The shower was as close to perfect as she entered, quickening the whole process by minutes. Instead of turning the water off, Ruby twisted the knobs to a temperature more to Weiss’ liking as they changed places with a bit of ballroom flare; a few simple dance steps, a dip, and kiss were as much a part of the routine as they were spontaneous each morning. Her toothbrush was prepared, and fresh clothes awaited her on a shelf specifically built for that purpose.

Ruby finished drying her hair as the next change-over occurred, a fifty-fifty chance game of “guess who” led Weiss to take her own prepared toothbrush as Ruby took her leave. The cycle never static, but familiar in all the best ways.

The rest of the morning was spent in each other's familiar company: pancakes with fruit awaited Ruby as she re-entered the kitchen. Yang somehow misplaced her favorite earrings, only to find them sitting atop a gift box containing a matching armband. Blake and Weiss juggled some almost-conflicting plans for the day back and forth. A spoon once favored by Ruby for ice cream eating was rediscovered in the back of an old box of clothes. Various long-tired jokes mixed with new information to tease one another about.

“... So then I said ‘Oatmeal? Are you **crazy**? ’”

“Wait, was this before, or after you spilled the spice packet on your arm, and it smelled like pumpkin spice everytime you punched someone?”

“It was definitely after. The smell didn't go away ‘till she upgraded, and the new model had the eggbeater mode she was using.”

“How do you know she wasn't just using a normal eggbeater?”

“She made that gesture with her hand to activate it. The next model she got was 100% thought-controlled.”

“Wait. Wasn't that the same one that the vent flap would spring open every time we'd flirt with her? I thought that was an involuntary reaction!”

“Hehe, Nope! That was one of the best long-cons. Ruby really helped sell it till my next upgrade.”

“Ruby!” “Ruby Rose!”

“What can I say? You two are cute when you work together. Plus, Yang pays well for silence.”

“My poor wallet... “

The rest of the day continued in much the same mood. Teasing, flirting, little gifts and stolen kisses. Blake and Weiss went shopping together for outfits and accessories, while Ruby and Yang stayed home to work on repairs and upgrades for their weapons. Afterwards, Ruby, Weiss and Yang took a trip to the local farmer's market to collect ingredients for Blake's current culinary experiment -something which apparently required a “left-handed spatula” to make. Upon their return, they were greeted with a full picnic basket and a set of instructions on where to take it.

Stowing their fresh ingredients, the three set off on a short but intense scavenger hunt for their missing fourth. Of course, for a group of globetrotting Huntresses “short” was relative; by the third clue they had left the neighborhood and found themselves at the local SDC tower offices. Normally a trip like that could take over an hour with good traffic. Thanks to a certain combination of semblances the trio were claiming the next clue from Whitley--ironically also in the middle of a scavenger hunt, and waiting to trade hints with them--in almost the same time as it took to reach their local market.
At the end of the clues, and in perfect ninja fashion, they found Blake sitting in their own backyard atop a picnic blanket reading a book. Her peace was promptly interrupted by three hungry women landing on her lap and demanding everything from food to kisses.

She caved in record time.

From there they took a trip to the boardwalk and pier. Not really riding or buying anything, just enjoying the atmosphere and playing the occasional game in an attempt to flex a little on the young children trying desperately to win the cheap stuffed beowolves or sphynxes. They gave said children their prizes afterwards of course, but nothing quite beat the look on a young face as Blake landed eight rings atop the bottles two at a time while reading a book.

After they had filled their quota for inspiring the next generation, it was dinner time. They had long ago learned that despite the ability to eat at the finest of restaurants, they more often all preferred more hole-in-the-wall places. More often than not, whatever new establishment they dared would then get a rather noticeable bump in customers and quality by their second visit.

Tonight was a sushi place that clearly fit more into passion project realm. It was made to look incredibly high class, the owner personally greeting every new patron wearing a sharp grey-on-black suit and a warm smile, opening the glass-panel doors and giving a polite bow. Warm towelettes offered upon being seated, and music playing which just made Ruby feel classy. She also maybe felt a little underdressed, until she saw several people in everything from hoodies to tuxedos. Clearly her own sundress was more than enough.

The food was amazing, though she found the company may have been affecting her opinions.

While digesting the food and reveling in the time together, the hours whizzed by.

Eventually they managed to get back to the house, and once again left jackets and shoes in just the rough direction from the door they were meant to go. The bed was welcoming as all four finished their rituals of makeup removal and preparations for night with the same practiced ease as the morning routine.

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Without fail, Ruby rose- *heh. ‘Rose’*-the next morning, refreshed and wrapped in the usual pile the The Best people, she considered just how lucky she was.

Also, without fail, the rest of the family awoke to a house in its proper order; jackets were in the closet, arranged by color and use. Shoes were stored in their appropriate racks and cubbies. Yang's deathtrap was close to ready as she stumbled into the room once more. The daily dance started again, unique and familiar.

Truly, not even Ruby knew how much she could love. It's end seemed to never be reached as each day brought some new reason to love them all more. That was one limit she was certain she'd never know.

So maybe Ruby was a hypocrite.

She could live with that.
Ahhh, this one was both fun and the worst thing to write. I was working on it from the previous Wednesday night until literally twelve minutes before I posted it. I challenged myself to write a chapter about being in long-term love, the little ways you adjust to another in your daily life. I also couldn't use the word "love" until the end.

I have no regrets. not even for misspelling regrets there.

Please, feedback is The Best. I hope your day is as full of little gestures as you can make it.
The small personal crisis of a lunch date seemed so much sillier from up here.

Ruby Rose was being ridiculous.

“Ruby Rose! You're being ridiculous.”

“Awww. Emerald, pleeeeeease? It's just a whoopie cushion.” Had those puppy-dog silver eyes been half gold, maybe they could have swayed her. Luckily for Emerald, Ruby Rose was not her daughter.

“Ruby. No. As much leeway as you have in this building, I cannot allow you un-approved entry into Mrs. Sh- Weiss’ office under any circumstance. It is literally the first listed responsibility on my contract.” It actually was, not ‘protection of the client and their wellbeing’ or ‘defence of the client’s assets’ but very literally ‘Do not allow Ruby Rose into Mrs. Schnee's office without permission.’

Emerald had thought the clause a joke at first. Surely someone in Weiss’ position needed actual protection. She was a trained Huntress, sure, but bombs and kidnappings were still a possibility. Weiss was much more popular than her father had been, that much was true; you just never knew when a new White Fang would try to make it move though. Not that it had ended well for the last few attempts on Weiss or her loved ones.

Ruby had proven it to be very serious within the first day when she tried to enter the room through a window. On the 87th floor. With full, private military-grade equipment. When questioned about why, she have quite possibly the most Ruby Rose reply in history: “I thought it'd be fun, and Weiss forgot her lucky socks.”

Weiss did actually change her socks before attending the luncheon she had been stressing about that morning.

“Awww, so no hope of bribing you with-” Ruby brought out something wrapped in foil from her bag. “-some wonderful, amazing, fresh-Blaked sourdough?”

Sweet Seasons, Bread? Like that's even a choice?

“You said whoopie cushion? Let me make sure it's up to SDC snuff.”

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Weiss Schnee, who somehow made a wet jacket and bangs look intentional, was staring at her door.

“Mi- Weiss? Is everything okay?”

“Emerald. Did Ruby stop by?” She turned towards Emerald's desk with a look that said she knew everything that had occurred within this entire city while she had been locked in that boardroom.

“She did. Yes.”

“How?”

“Front lobby. Executive elevator. Quick stop at the supply closet, unsuccessful. Walked up and asked to be let in.”

“I see. No semblance use? Didn't try to HALO drop onto the side of the building? Not even a disguise?”

“No ma'am. The weather is well outside allowed conditions for a hot drop, but I can forward the recordings to your office of all of her movements within a three block radius.”

“I see.” She seemed to consider the information, turning towards the door, then back to Emerald's desk. “Did you let her in?”

“I'm contractually obligated not to. Ruby’s got your number, not mine.”

Seemingly placated by the bit of backsass, Weiss gave a small, curt nod in agreement and entered her office with a confident stride. Emerald began counting down.

*Three… Two… One…*

“Emerald, you traitor.” Weiss’ voice came from the speaker on Emerald’s desk. A statement of fact, with the promise of retribution in the most humiliating way hidden in its calm, even tone.

She couldn't help herself, Emerald burst out laughing. She was having trouble breathing, or even remaining in her chair. It was starting to hurt.

Eventually, she did recover from the hysterics, only to find Weiss had left her office once more and was staring at her with an amused expression. One that said the joke was funny, and she was happy that Emerald was happy, but that an explanation was more than required.

“Contractually obligated?”

“Yes ma'am, SDC standard contract; Page 4, section B, subsection III, clause B: In the event of any bribe/gift/offering originating from the kitchen (or appropriate equivalent) of Blake Belladonna, no legal recourse shall be taken against any who accept; we're not monsters.”

The specific wording of it often left Emerald wondering if even the Grimm dared to turn down food from that woman's counter. No mortal being could resist the temptation, that much was sure.

Weiss, long since used to her security guard's eerie ability to recite near anything with crystal clarity, took that information in. Before pinching the bridge of her nose in seeming defeat.

“I'm surrounded by traitors. Enemies on all sides. Outnumbered!” the dramatic flair was theatrical and over the top, but never failed to bring both a feeling of oncoming doom and amusement to Emerald.
“Get ready Ms. Sustrai. You've declared your allegiances in this war. I hope you've prepared for the consequences. Ruby may be a little trickster, but she learned everything she knows from her sister. And if I remember correctly, dear sweet Emmy, you have a date tomorrow.”

The threat was implied and terrifying. Emerald hadn't been this scared since probably Haven. Of course, back then it had been mortal terror, now it was something between despair and early-onset giggles. The joy of these prank wars was half rooted in the pranking, and half in the being pranked after all.

Whoopie cushions and shock gum were the handshakes of kingdoms before the slaughter truly began. Troop movements along borders in ‘training exercises’ heralding the coming ransacking.

“I look forward to your surrender, High-chancellor Schnee. May your battles be glorious, and your defeat crushing.” Emerald added with a crisp mock salute.

“Likewise, Empress-Ascendant Sustrai. I expect the lamentation of your women to be on my desk and color coded by range, pitch, and desire.”

The declaration was set, as per tradition. So began the twenty-eighth war of the Roses (and friends).

Unfortunately, the true opening salvos would have to wait. Weiss had a call to make first, and Emerald needed lunch.

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The “lobby” of the SDC building was easily one of the more impressive buildings Emerald had ever seen. She had spent her time in the castle of Evernight, with its ancient splendor and ageless architecture letting you know just how small you were in the eyes of its inhabitant. The halls of several Academies had graced her life as well. Most where of a similar scale and import to Evernight in their own ways. Alternate to Salem's refuge though, they all felt like homes to the countless people who inhabited them across the years.

The lobby was… it was closer to Evernight if she was being honest. It wasn't a home, it was very much a show of splendor and money to the puny public. Not that it was intentionally trying to match such a dark place; but they very clearly both wanted to show off.

Two opposite walls, for the first thirteen floors or so, were glass panels and city views. With storefronts and shops lining the other two sides of the grand mall. There were bridges branching between the opposing walkways, all glass and white metal.

Above the shopping center's open-core railings the building became the more bureaucratic offices belonging to the SDC and lease-payers alike. Not nearly as flashy as any who managed to purchase office space down below, but still prestigious like few other buildings in the world.

The ground floor itself was a typical shopping mall, with people coming in from the rain with families and friends to browse in a more pleasant climate. Clothes and speciality shops of all kinds and quality vying for attention in a strictly-regulated manner.

The third and fourth floors were dedicated to the higher-end of things; tailors and similar to-order craftspeople for the wealthy to look down upon others for not shopping at.
The fifth and sixth, through almost complete coincidence, were mostly world-culture and Faunus-run establishments. They weren't segregated to the section, not anymore than the owners did to themselves anyway. Still the idea that the faunus were above the hoity-toity almost always found Emerald amused.

Above that there were privacy fields active to keep the noise from below at bay, with the lease spaces used for more open things: studios for dance and other arts, floor space for show rooms, really everything that needed extra open space to work with.

Another five floors above, sat a two-story space dedicated to ensuring employees from all over the building were cared for. Mechanical servants took the place of flesh-and-blood staff in this worker's retreat. Rooms dedicated to the latest entertainment systems and appropriate sports, several complimentary snackbars and resutaunts, a jungle gym for those more kinetically inclined, an actual gym for those who needed to work the stress off, countless prototype products available to ensure they could withstand real-world use and abuse, more services ranging from spas to sensory-deprivation pods were available as well.

The final floor was for security and Hunter services. Job boards and other aura-recommended service necessities were all linked to the central Hub of Vale by hardened, thrice-redundant, hidden and secured hardwire. The only way to forcefully break the SDC tower's link to the Hunter population would be to kill every last hunter in the country; in such a case, the Tower could act as a temporary CCT link to call for external backup. The Schnees did not fuck around when it came to possible Fall-level scenarios.

Emerald had tried most everything available across the building, within reason, at one point or another; she'd been working here for almost as long as it had been open to the public after all. The only things that had been here longer in fact, were a fifth-floor noodle shop, and her favorite lunch stop here in the employee-section: Nickle and Dyme.

Both Polendina models (mk IV), Nickle and Dyme were among the first created units from Penelope “Penny” Polendina's second-gen line. They were designed after the death of Dr. Polendina by Penny herself, and were the first attempt at something close to mass production. Because of complications with the Doctor's original design, apparently, neither one had aura above the level of a locked child. They each had individuality, but neither one would ever attain the level of personality available to their ‘mother’.

They made a mean Penn-ini though.

As Emerald sat in her favorite spot, staring out the glass window into the city beyond, she appreciated just how amazing this place was. Here she was, eating a free hot sandwich over a hundred feet above ground, created by two not-quite-robots, watching a storm rage through a city she had twice been instrumental in the assault of.

The small personal crisis of a lunch date seemed so much sillier from up here.

As the rain continued to pelt the glass beside her, Emerald took to her favorite pastime while in the staff lounge: being a dastardly eavesdropper.

She made more than enough to afford various types of entertainment, even ignoring those available to her here, but none quite matched her interest in the lives of strange people. The stories of heroes and villains didn’t interest her so much due to her own story being so similar, so most games movies or books were out. Action and daring were similarly familiar to her, the odd humdrum of other’s daily lives was simply something she hadn’t grown up with. No manufactured drama or bad jokes, just the stuff they talked about with their friends over a coffee. She was living a similar life
these days, but her imagination was a wild beast for the stories she pieced together.

“...-y little brother likes that show, keeps bugging me to get him tickets to the mo-...” *That’s sweet.*

“...-ou think she’s interested? I mean, look at her!” “Man, just, you gotta go for it. Won’t know unless you ask, and I sure as hell don’t know.” *Go get her! Nothing hurts like distant pining, kid.*

“...-inking I should... you’re his sister. And I don’t want to be… you know. But I was thinking of taking a trip down to Menagerie, the Shallo-” “Cyanne, seriously? Those are a big deal. It’s sweet you want to try, but the Shallows are going to spit you out. I won’t say not to do it, just. Be ready. I’m sure he’ll lov-...” *Damn, Cyanne. Going big for that man, good luck.*

The storm outside wasn’t letting up anytime soon, but Emerald was quickly running out of lunch to enjoy to its steady roar. The little snippets continued on around her, and she loved the fact they ever got the chance.

Maybe that was ridiculous coming from someone who had once worked so hard to create a world where they wouldn’t. She knew it was unhealthy to hold herself so harshly for actions made so long ago, but the return of Cinder to her life had been reminding her of those years recently. The time spent apart was massive compared to the time spent together, but she couldn’t deny just how much weight that time still carried. She still had a day to try and figure out just how she felt.

Was she the girl, still clinging to Cinder like a shadow? Asking for a family without knowing just what that meant?

Was she pining? Wanting the thing that she knew so little about?

Did Emerald want a grand gesture of love? To prove that Cinder really did care?

She’d have to figure that out soon enough, maybe Weiss could help. She seemed to know her way around relationships.

She was overthinking things again, wasn’t she? *Calm down Emerald. It’s just Lunch. Maybe we can talk it out together. Who knows? Maybe I don’t know Cinder as well as I used to.*

*Yeah, right. And Mercury has real legs.*

*Emerald Sustrai. You’re being ridiculous.*

Emerald Sustrai *was* being ridiculous.

Then again, her life was pretty ridiculous these days too. So maybe she was just being normal.

Until that was proven, one way or the other, she had a job to do. A job to do, and bread to fantasize about.

Chapter End Notes

Well. that's 600-odd words I just wrote about a building. didn't wake up expecting to do that!
I'm not entirely sure about how I feel about this chapter. It seemed to snake its way all around my brain.

Feedback is welcome in this house, as are all kinds of homemade breads and delicious world cuisine.
Sure are looking fine

Chapter Summary

Maybe a bird.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Yellhead and deTimber for the betas

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Good MOOOOOOOOOOOORNIN’ MR. ZIP-ZIP-ZIP!“

Cinder was very quickly reacquainted with the waking world. The scroll currently playing its musical alarm, then, was very quickly reacquainted with the wall.

Ashes to Ashes.

It may have been a silly thing to think first thing in the morning, but most habits you kept from childhood were. Cinder honestly wasn’t quite sure why that one had remained, of all things. She hadn’t been ‘Ashes’ to anyone in decades, but still she could hear her mother waking her up every morning to start chores. Her life was certainly less predictable these days, maybe that’s why she still woke to the same song her father would belt out to shake the sleep from his family over breakfast. Familiarity was a powerful drug.

Still, the routine demanded Cinder Fall rise. Even if she was reluctant to leave her little haven of comfort, certain needs demanded attention. Slipping from her downy elysium, Cinder nearly toppled to the ground. Right. Arm first. Then pee. Then reminisce. Priorities Cinder, priorities.

As she made her way through the daily rituals, Cinder's mental train didn't seem to circle back to the thoughts of her childhood. Instead swapping tracks to mundane things like trying to remember which shampoo would work better with the rain outside. Or how her bookshelf seemed both far too empty, but somehow full of the only things she felt belonged in a location of such prestige.

She flipped the interlink to local updates and warnings, a habit born from being trapped in a small town where knowing of a possible bandit raid could save your life. Since coming to Vale, it was mostly weather and fluff stories from what she'd seen. A few passing mentions of Grimm attacks along the borders let her know she was still living on remnant and not some strange world where inner demons never became outer demons.

The Grimm, unlike bandits, had long since lost their teeth to Cinder; even once she lost her own proverbial teeth. The lessons of control and intimidation remained ingrained into her habits, and thus the Grimm remained beneath her heel. Though knowing if the local market would be closed due to attack or not was still an important thing to know. Good habits die just as hard as strange ones.
As she listened to the reports and warnings, Cinder worked her way around the kitchen. It wouldn't do to start today with something as drab as a bowl of cereal after all; maybe an old Mistrali dish? She was in a Memory Lane-type mood after all. No, she'd have plenty of time to remember that life later. Maybe something a bit more Vacuan, something simple but exotic.

Let's see… Rice, plantains, eggs, do I have any- ah yes! It's not Rill's backwater chorizo, but sausage is sausage in this case. All I need now is a good pepper sauce, maybe Deathstalker? She took a whiff. Ugh, too spicy for breakfast.

“You'd think I'd be used to actually having ingredients available again. Sweet Maide-... Am I swearing by myself when I say that?” That damned tiny town had been lacking in so many departments. What food had been available was either picked earlier that day, fresh but repetitive in its flavor; or canned the point you may as well just add enough salt that you'd be lucky to have a tongue the next morning. Exotic in that town boiled down to the occasional trade with a neighboring town's crop, nothing like a well-traveled woman might crave.

The morning went rather slow from that point for Cinder's liking, Sundays were rarely exciting, even without plans to look forward to, or rain to prevent them. The only thing left on her agenda was working out, and with the storm outside it was clearly time to snuggle up with a blanket in the window and drink tea instead.

Truly, Cinder Fall was a woman tortured by her inner demons.

Eventually, after long enough that both options had run their course, something akin to jitters set in. Not that Cinder was nervous, no. she merely… wanted to ensure she looked her best. That was why she had double checked her available outfits, weather allowing, no other reason. Her hair was also toyed with several more times; to hide the eyepatch, or show it off, maybe treat it casually? I could look into a bionic, maybe? I’ve already got the arm to worry about in the mornings, who knows what an eye would need- her scroll buzzed with a message, interrupting the thought process.

Gems: Lobby

Ever the expressive one, Emerald. Still, it was an attribute Cinder once appreciated in her followers; back when she had followers. Neo had been quite good for that, at least. Still, these days the lack of fluff left something to be desired. With coat, purse, keys, and scroll all accounted for, Cinder began the trip down from her floor.

Maybe I should get a pet. Something living to fill the place with some life. They probably wouldn't let me keep a Seer, even if I could find one. Maybe a bird.

She had never been one for animal companionship before, but still her current home felt empty; something to consider, she supposed.

Emerald was waiting for her, dressed for a day spent around the rain, not that it was surprising. She was sitting on one of the pleather chairs for waiting guests, and rose to greet Cinder. Those shoulders told a definite story of strength and confidence. Her face, told a more complex story however. She stood… almost exactly as she had all those years ago; professional, and restrained. Now though, it wasn’t fear which kept her at a distance, but something more disciplined; like a knight or a guard might stand near their charge.

“I can honestly say I wasn’t expecting a pickup. What’s the occasion?”

“M- Weiss, lent me a company car. Said 'leaving your date to walk through the rain alone is a
terrible way to begin, or in this case rekindle, a relationship.” Emerald seemed to shift uncomfortably at the explanation. Maybe something to do with flaunting her power to me?

“That’s, kind of her, I suppose. Reminds me the time we spent in… Atlas actually. I really shouldn’t be surprised by that.” the two women began to move out of the lobby as they continued talking. Only stopping to give a polite nod to the doorwoman before Cinder stopped in her tracks.

“Schnee lent you… a limousine? For a lunch date.”

“Rose-Schnee. And it's also not a limo; this is the town car. You've seen the limo. Don't you remember from last wee- Right, you probably don't remember much with the amount you drank.” Cinder really couldn't deny that, she remembered the class that day, then… Belladonna? After that the next clear memory was waking up for a lovely eggs benedict with lox and chives. There was a distinct shock of mortified embarrassment somewhere in there, but she thought that was from who made the breakfast.

“No, I can't say I do remember a limo, but I apparently had a wonderful time with some delicious company regardless.” Emerald turned beet red at that.

“R-right. I-uhh… let's get going then. Shall we?” Really, Emerald, flustered by just mentioning having a good night with someone? Were you always this prudish?

As they approached the car, a driver stepped out to cover them with an umbrella and lead them to the door. As they climbed in Cinder couldn't help but be somewhat put off by the whole event again.

“No offense, dear. But why does Schnee’s lent company car have a driver? Last I checked you were certified in nearly every major pilot, driver, and operator's license available.”

“Rose-Schnee. She’s very particular about it outside of the office. And technically most of those I never actually passed the test for, you just had Watts give me those certifications to let us get through checkpoints with less issue. I’m also, if I remember correctly: an EMT, Forewoman, professional Boxer, database security specialist. Forgetting my more mundane covers, I also hold degrees in: psychology, anesthesiology, pulviology, reproductive endocrinology, and art history. And that's not even getting into the military-level clearances I apparently had.”

She did have a point, no matter how well certified you were legally, it didn't actually mean you knew how to- “Did you say Art History? And I'm not sure I remember any plans involving endocrinology, let alone reproductive endocrinology.”

“Oh. Right, no. Those two I actually earned. Along with the nurse-level certification in pulviology. The classes made up my, err, probationary sentence. Like how you help Ruby teach a class, I had to show my ability to work within the rules for a while. After my period was up, I figured I may as well finish the degree as far as I could since it was all being paid for anyway, and I was apparently good enough to make it all the way to a doctorate. The endocrinology I finished right before they got Mercury, and was mostly so I could use the pulviology certification.”

Cinder was deeply disturbed that apparently Emerald had the capacity to earn any degree, let alone two. PhDs at that!

Outside of the academies, very few Huntresses or Huntsmen, ever really thought about higher education. The lifestyle didn't exactly allow for study breaks. Not to mention the differences in skill sets were massive; daily combat didn't translate into writing ability, or much of anything outside of sports. Hunters were restricted in that regard as well; only certain competitions allowed
aura-wielders to enter, and usually only within their own divisions.

“Does that mean I should be calling you Doctor Sustrai? And what possible use could dust work have with pregnancy? Medical application somehow, right?” Dustcraft, so far as pulviology was concerned, was far removed from the practical, relatively large-scale use in combat. It was certainly a study path most any decently practiced Hunter could attain some form of respect in, but that didn't explain the crossover.

Emerald seemed to become more comfortable as the conversation, and the rainy city blocks, passed. She nodded almost casually to the question. “Basically. Most less-than-standard medical procedures require at least one certified pulviologist in case a complication comes up, but that particular combination is used in, well, to make babies. A single one in particular, in my case, but they don't exactly offer single-use educations.”

What.

“As for calling me Doctor: only if you call Ruby ‘Doctor Rose.’ She founded the formal study of ‘thaumatology’, magic, as far as academia is concerned. But she's also got a few doctorates in various weaponry-related fields, and honoraries on top of that.”

And here I thought I had wasted my life in that tiny hellhole… what a relief I'm not some ultra-wealthy discoverer of an entire branch of science!

“So aside from your life being perfect, what do you do with your days now? You work with, since I'm not calling her Rose-Schnee, Weiss I know. But aside from being detained by the security team on my last visit, my experience with the SDC is probably outdated.”

“Oh. I technically run security. Mostly in name, my lieutenants do everything aside from sit at my desk and make sure Ruby doesn't get into Weiss’ office.”

“Of all the uses for a doctorate. You watch a door. ”

Emerald started laughing, hysterically. Once she calmed down, she looked at Cinder's bewildered face with something close to mischief.

“In my defence, the door is only one point of entry. And if I remember correctly, Ruby hasn't gotten past me more than a handful of times since I started; which is more than either of us can say about before .”

Oh…I said that out loud. Grimm take me. Cinder's face erupted into a beet-red blush. Emerald just started cracking up again, and just like the night at the gym the laughter was honestly infectious.

After they had both calmed down from the serious case of the giggles, a new question came to Cinder's mind, luckily not just her mouth this time.

“So, Ruby's still gotten past you then? I'd tell you about my years of education on the workings of book clubs and failed attempts at gardening, but your day-to-day seems much more entertaining.” That earned another blush from Emerald.

“Well, I'm sure it wasn't that bad-” her sentence was cut short by nothing short of a death glare from Cinder.

“Would you like me to start with the baby pictures, or the corn gossip?” Cinder could literally taste bile just joking about repeating her torture.
“Right. Let's not do that… ever. But the last time Ruby got past me wa-... Oh no.” Emerald suddenly fell quiet as she stared past Cinder.

Quickly glancing behind her with a rush of panic, Cinder didn't see anything that would constitute that kind of reaction. Looking back at the well-muscled woman proved that it was more of a thousand-yard stare than actually focusing on anything.

“The car. That's why she said I should use it! Damned by sourdough of all things.”

“What?” Emerald wasn't making any sense now. Bread? Car? What does this have to do with Ruby?

Emerald seemed to recover from her shellshock at the question. “The last time Ruby got past me, it started a war. That was yesterday, so this is probably the first prank.”

“Weiss’ idea of a prank is… a fancy not-limo? She is aware that most people aren't going to be embarrassed when they pull up in a shorter limo than someone else, right?”

“A much as I want to say ‘yes’ to that… let's just say that's not the problem. She got Yang on her side for now.”

Cinder suddenly had a flashback to a time she stumbled into a den of Grimm unarmed.

“Xiao Long is involved?”

“Almost definitely.”

“How bad does it get?”

“Remember back at Beacon?”

“The Snow Maiden?” That earned a nod.

“Now imagine if Mercury had near-infinite lien and at least another decade of experience.”

“We're dead, aren't we?”

“We'll wish we were. If it's any consolation; it might just be directed at me.”

The car then pulled to a stop, with the driver coming around to open the door once more. “Deer in the headlights” didn't begin to describe the looks on their two faces. Then the driver began speaking in a loud, clear voice that could only come a formally trained crier, on a busy city street. During the lunch rush.

“Announcing the arrival of Doctor Emerald of House Sustrai, The Thief, Lady-knight of house Rose-Schnee… “ he continued on as Emerald squared her shoulders and stepped out of the car. A look of dread replaced by a practiced neutrality. Leaving Cinder alone in the car, at least until the Crier/Driver was finished; she was many things, but rude wasn't one of them. He reached the end of Emerald's list, and Cinder thought herself safe.

“Accompanying her on this date: Miss Ash “Cinder Fall” of House Vermillion, Maiden of the Glass Wastes, Former Fall Maiden… “

Cinder Fall wanted nothing but to wake up from this nightmare.

And possibly to murder someone. Or at least prank them back.
Probably Xiao Long.

_\textit{Dust to dust, you blonde devil. If the Thief doesn’t get you, then the Butcher must.}_

Chapter End Notes

Is it my life goal to torture Cinder with harmless public humiliation? 
Maybe.
Did I base this entire chapter off of an old camp song from my childhood? 
Absolutely.
Did Cinder make Tipico for breakfast? 
Mmmm... Tipico.
What is "pulviology"? 
The study of dust.
Do I live for feedback and comments? 
Take a guess!
Chapter Summary

Likely with the assistance of Blake, or Weiss if she was feeling spiteful.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“...No one really knows why Uaine's Ratio doesn't seem to accept any numbers divisible by ten in such a violent manner. Though countless scholars have attempted to proof the subject; often at the expense of body parts. What we do know is that Dust really likes pairs, sets of four, pairs of pairs, and not much besides.”

Ruby's lecture came to a close with that, and she motioned for Cinder to step forward. The other woman’s part of the lesson was was almost entirely theory, calculation and a demonstration; which meant Ruby could have probably given it easier herself. Cinder was aware of this, of course, but it helped to be able to rest her voice for a bit. It also had the added benefit of ensuring Cinder was seen as an actual teacher by the students and not just the grumpy scarred woman who liked to glare at people from the corner.

Life was full of small sacrifices like that.

If she was being honest with herself, Ruby was enjoying having someone to offload actual work onto; and not just some poor, civilian graduate student in search of a letter of recommendation. Given just how volatile Dust could be, especially when intended to be volatile, it was a wonder why aura training wasn’t a part of the curriculum for even basic pulviology. Really, she probably should have tried to encourage it far more than she had. Likely with the assistance of Blake, or Weiss if she was feeling spiteful.

Unfortunately, according to the various armchair experts in positions of academic power: ‘Mrs. Rose-Schnee, just because you have the hammer of aura in your toolbox, does not make every safety problem a nail.’ they would invariably say with some… variation. Then proceed to ask for her opinion on safety protocols during the next Dust-related explosion on their campuses.

Honestly, you'd think they had something against their students not blowing themselves up. But, she was getting distracted. As much as Ruby loved to gripe about various shortcomings in the world of academia; she also really wanted to see Cinder's presentation.

It was a relatively simple one, mix a few types of Dust, at the behest of a few select students, and try to test its viability.

Being the head of the entire Beacon weaponry department, Ruby could theoretically obtain any Dust imaginable as required. On top of a few un imaginable ones. The amounts of each were limited only by the time it took to create the batch sizes she ordered, and given her own vast facilities she could even create them herself; albeit in smaller batches with the use of an on-site spread of Dust types located directly beneath the classroom, and a small-scale mixer housed in a demonstration desk at the front of the room.
Being legally co-owner of the largest Dust distribution and research conglomerate on the planet didn't hurt when it came to state of the art teaching tools.

“Okay, let's start off with… Miss Lily, give me a base Dust.” Cinder had reached the end of her explanation, and had begun searching for her volunteers.

Ruby's eldest, adorable golden shenaniganizer that she was, of course threw a curveball to start the experiment off with. “Growth, twelve Rings, forty-four percent purity.” *hmm, growth-base, wish I worked with it more, let's see how this plays out, Jei.*

Cinder, with the help of as much training as Ruby could provide over the summer, near-expertly added the selected base to the mixing table's instruction set. The bionic arm working perfectly with the volumetric display. *Maybe I should talk her into an eye, depth perception might come in handy.*

“Next, Mister Ona-Dorned.” Cinder snapped her attention to her next victim.

“Do I have to-?” the brown-furred boy began to question.

“No, you should not need to give a purity level. Miss Lily has previous education on the mixing of Dust, and growth Dust is a rather advanced base-mix. It requires a purity standard to ensure it will stop growing at some point. Stick to the Dust you are comfortable with, myself and Professor Rose can handle the measurements as needed.”

“Okay, uh, Energy, with… four mili-”

**Mister Ona-Dorned** . I’ve already lost one arm in my life, I don’t intend to lose another to anything short of a second yet-unknown magical bloodline trait. Remember the lecture you were just supposed to be listening to: no divisibles of ten.” *Woo! Caught it in one, Cinder. Though you still have at least one more Dust type to bring you out.* Ruby nodded her head once in silent approval for Cinder's benefit, and winced inwardly at the bloodline comment.

“T-twelve Rings then?” Fuz stuttered out, sounding entirely unsure.

“Good call, that's one pair down then. Next, how about Mister Carnation.” *Dick joke in three… Two… One…*

“Binding Dust. Four Rings.” *awww. I mean, I can make a joke out of that, but c'mon!*

“Hmm, alright. I've never seen these mixed together before, honestly. Professor?” Cinder seemed to think three was enough, and given the fact they set as a pair of pairs, Ruby found herself agreeing.

The mixing table was a wonder of technology, really. As Ruby approached to double check levels and predicted results, she always found the ease with which it created samples incredible; and reminded her of the early years of trying to do the process more by hand. Mixing Dust purely freehand was possible, of course, but the results varied widely. Even when she had moved away from trying to do it in-house, it could still take several hours to get a sample back from a spare SDC lab; turning the whole lesson into a multi-class event.

“While I've never mixed it in class, I know the effect of this particular blend very intimately. Let's lower the purity of the growth Dust down to, let's say sixteen percent, just to ensure we don't run into any von-Neumann issues. And other than that, I'll wait for the output to tell just what it is you've all made.” As she made the necessary alterations to the inputs -binding Dust required special tools that it wouldn't, well, bind to it- Ruby brought up two things on the room's two side displays, leaving the center screen to show technical details of the ongoing mix.
“Now, I have two options while we wait. One is a video of just what happens when you don't respect Uaine's Ratio. Lots of explosions and screaming in that one; you're all trying to be Hunters, knowledge of disaster is part of that, even the traumatizing parts.” A few students went from slightly interested to less than enthused, but at least one or two perked up at it.

_Fifty-fifty chance between messed up kid, or desire to focus on disaster relief. Either way, I need to tell Coal. I wonder what being a student advisor for these kids is even like…_

“The second option, is a montage of some past year's creations in action. Some are interesting, some are literally watching grass grow. That won't take up the entire waiting period most likely, but afterwards we can switch over to watching our current batch finish up. Vote now, kiddos!” As one, all the scrolls other than her own alerted those present there was a class poll to answer.

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Strangely enough, the vast majority of the class had chosen to watch the grass growing. It really was weird seeing herself go from what looked to be far too young to teach a class, to her current appearance. Which, admittedly, she still felt she looked too young to be teaching a class.

Port had really set an unreasonable body standard in that regard.

Luckily, across the years only a few injuries had come from testing the Dust. _Property damage, on the other hand…_ The closest to an actual explosion was no bigger than her own upon first meeting Weiss all those years ago. That had been the last year she tried to do the process on site before the addition of her desk too; it was probably for the best.

During the lull of just watching the new Dust settling and being agitated again, Cinder and Ruby had made sure no student was in need of additional help, but most seemed content to talk quietly or work on another project. This demonstration did technically take the place of the day's lab, but Ruby didn't feel the need to force her students to stare at a monochrome video feed of what essentially amounted to a robot sifting flour.

She wasn't evil.

“Right, Cinder, how was the date? Heard you two went to… oh, man, dangit, what is that place Emerald likes? They do that mask thing. I've been there, too! Gah. You'd think I would reme-”

“Foxtrot's.”

“Thaat's it, Foxtrot's. How was it? I think they had really good Mac n Cheese. Or was that Bread Sandwich? No, they have that grilled cheese with peach slices…” Ruby knew _far_ too many good places for food. It was actually becoming a problem, a cheesy, delicious problem. Cinder had a dark look cross her features at the question though. _That's not a ‘I had a ton of fun’ look. That's a ‘Yang is going to find out what revenge feels like’ look_.

Just as Cinder was opening her mouth to answer, a loud Ding rang out from the mixing table. The two of them quickly dropped the attempt at a conversation and moved towards the rude machine. As they reached it, a silver tube rose from below.

It was maybe as big around as a coffee mug, and about as tall as three stacked on top of each other. Along two opposite sides ran a clear glass indicator which currently glowed a deep green color.
Ruby released the safety lock and inspected the finished product, even opening the top to look inside.

“Congratulations! You've all just created a batch of Bonding Dust. Known for its jade coloration and usage in all sorts of traditions. It's also got a few medical uses alongside. It is, by and large, completely useless in combat however. Can anyone tell me what any of its possible applications are though?” Ruby was slightly disappointed that so few students had apparently ever heard of the stuff. As she handed the unsealed container over to Cinder, she moved back behind the table and turned the displays to technical lists of Bonding Dust attributes.

“Really? No one here knows what Bonding Dust can be used for? Alright, not that surprising I guess, it's not exactly sold in your corner Dust shop.” Even Cinder seemed slightly intrigued by the strange substance.

“Bonding Dust, as the name implies, is used to bond things. Unlike Binding Dust, however, it's a two-way street. Most uses of it, commercially, are in wedding bands; Both civilian metal rings, and Hunter Cloth accessories; like my belt, for instance. When charged with the aura of at least two people, it creates a kind of amalgam within whatever it's infused into, connecting the two and making something stronger than either one individually. Now, there are some weaknesses to the situation.” Ruby saw a hand raise, but she couldn't be certain who was actually asking the question in the darned room however. “Go ahead.”

“So, why not make like, a set of armor with it? Why keep it limited to just a small accessory?” Ruby was impressed, that was honestly a good question to ask, seeing as how most of the room had apparently just learned this new Dust could combine auras and make them stronger.

“It's not a good idea to use more than a small amount of Bonding Dust; a few complications can arise if too much is used at once. So while it is technically possible to infuse armor with Bonding Dust, it's a very bad idea. Bonding, unlike most Dust types, actually consumes aura when activated, and the more you have, the more it will take.” From the shifting sounds, she could tell a few students at least got the picture.

“I'm sure most of you know legends about ‘Aura Vampires’ who would attack villages and drain people of their meagre auras, leaving them to wither away or sometimes be ignored by grimm, but otherwise pretty lifeless? Those are thought to be the work of Bonding Dust overexposure. No concrete tests of true scientific value have been run to double check, but some less-than-scientific cases have been discovered over the years. If you would like to know more on that subject, look up Arthur Watts in your free time. Be warned, that man had no respect for anything but his own ego.” Cinder gave what looked like an unconscious motion of agreement at the dig. The class wasn't put in the same lighthearted mood however. At least I can end it on a high note.

“Outside of infusing objects with it, however, Bonding Dust has a slew of applications in the medical fields. Primarily in surgery and recovery. Because of its unique fusing abilities: it can be used to ensure any living transplant is accepted by the aura and ‘healed’ to not be rejected by the recipient, ever. It can also be used to allow families otherwise unable to bear children to have genetic offspring. Using something from my life as an example once more: both of my kids are thanks to the use of Bonding Dust.” That got some scribbles, whispers, and glances. Teenagers really were some of the potentially meanest beings on Remnant, unfortunately.

“Unfortunately, that will have to conclude class for today, Bonding Dust is heavily regulated and we don’t exactly have a way to demonstrate its use anyway, unless you’d like to hold a wedding and haven’t told me. Because this is your first class of the week, I would like to remind you all that this coming Saturday will be the first time you can all sign up for the dance committee, as well as
the opening of the class offices for nominations. Have a great day kids.”

The students were gone before the lights even came back up to their normal intensity.

As Ruby was left alone with Cinder, a clear question on the tip of her tongue was interrupted. “When she was little her nickname was “Little Jay” but once she could spell she decided it was J-E-I to be more like her grandpa. Then she outgrew the “little” but “Jei” stuck around, Especially with Em.” The explanation brought a flood of old memories back with it, nearly all of them warm. I need to visit dad soon, see how mom’s doing too. Ruby was so caught up in her upcoming visit to patch she forgot to reset the mixing table before the next period began. It was a quick fix, but she had Cinder to worry about it now. Having a friend who knew what they were doing was the best sometimes.

Ruby considered her a friend at least, she hoped Cinder did as well.

At least Cinder had Aura in case she messed up.

Chapter End Notes

Exposition gotta exposit. But, at least I have a legit reason to explain things to the unlearned masses (of students) Ruby IS a teacher after all.

Sorry this one's a day late. I couldn't find a good ending I linked. Had to let it stew for a while.

So, Yeah, I forget if I left it all in this version, but Jei's full legal name is Jade Lily; after the color of the Bonding Dust.

As always I take your feedback and create a kind of amalgam and come back stronger!
Capybara and Connoli

Chapter Summary

"Hate hate hate. Hate hate. Double hate. Triple hate with… Wheatgrass?"

Chapter Notes

Big respects to YellHead for the kick-ass beta.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emerald felt the cold of the rain as she exited the towncar.

It was almost enough to extinguish the heat of embarrassment from having a formal crier introduce her to the patrons of a small cafe she frequented to the point of having a usual. It was nowhere near enough to convince her that Cinder had somehow not managed to regained her Maiden powers though; she was almost sure there was steam rolling off the woman as she exited the car. At least Emerald had the time to appreciate the little Cafe between her own List being called, and then Cinder's own heralded approach.

It really was a nice place, a large window taking up the front of the space, brick walls adorned with kitschy placards and paintings with dumb words of wisdom like ‘If at first you don't succeed, do it the way your mother taught you.’ Along the ceiling were hung coffee mugs and teacups, modified into lampshades, with fairy lights strung down to give the room a cozier feeling without robbing it of the high ceiling. There were even some old school vacuum bulbs spaced in sconces adorning each side. The overall effect made Emerald feel as though she had stepped into some kind of indoor grassy glade, where fae were happy to serve and entertain their passing mortal guests.

Speaking of mythical royalty… Emerald was still stuck on just how Cinder chose to dress for the day; in the best of ways. She had somehow managed to find a coat featuring what Emerald hoped where fake feathers adorning one shoulder, and a bone charm chain ending in a bird skull attached to the zipper hanging from the other. The coat itself was a lovely burnt-brick color though, and the cut allowed for twin coattails to dangle down to her knees, with a cowled hood deep enough she looked like some mountain-dwelling monk on leave from her monastery. A pair of black, lightly patterned leggings sufficed in the chilly but still temperate city climate this time of year. Her boots continued the voodoo theme of the jacket, with several ornamental strips of rough leather appearing to be holding the footwear together, and shiny metal toe-plates shaped like talons standing out from the black leather; the heels were modeled in complement.

Emerald was far less done up, but given where they were she didn't feel underdressed for the occasion. A white vest with detachable hood and a collection of metal buckles for aesthetics, a nice green blouse with silver detailing around the roll-up sleeves, and a pair of black slacks (that by some miracle actually had pockets!) all tied together with a set of black weather-appropriate boots that matched her belt. It was more fashion forward than her usual attire, but sometimes it felt good to show off her sense of style.
“I hate them… Ruby, her sister, everyone and everything she loves. I hate it all.” Cinder grumbled as they found an unoccupied table. Emerald was practically laughing by the end of the tirade, and the next comment turned ‘practically’ into ‘loudly.’

“Hate hate hate. Hate hate. Double hate with… Wheatgrass?” Emerald couldn't quite figure out if Cinder was looking at the menu, or running down a list of all the people she had met since coming to Vale. Made all the harder by the cafe's hot/cold speciality drink list having a “unrighteous cause” theme to the names.

And that was the breaking point for Emerald, despite her best efforts.

“Aha-hahaha… Ha! C-Cinder y-youhoohoo. Ah. Hoo, giv-give me a second… Hehehe… Whooh!” Emerald should have cared about the death glare coming her way as she broke into even more laughter, but the whole “bone-queen being confused by a drink list” bit was just too much for her poor mind all at once. “S-sorry. Sorry. It's just, you’re like a Tuesday-night cartoon villain right now. All ‘Graaa! Curse you heroes, if only I had known the power of friendship and wheatgrass!’ I swear you were about to start monologuing your evil plan to an army of ‘Evil VooDooers’ or something.”

Cinder seemed a bit blindsided by the comment, her eyes darting back and forth for a moment as she pieced together the information.

Once her brain had caught up with the world, though, her face immediately smacked into her hands. As Cinder slid her hands down her face, her makeup apparently magic in its lack of smudging - Wait… is she even wearing any?- Cinder's defeated gaze locked onto Emerald.


“Cinder. I may not have seen you for the past few decades, but don't lie to me. You know I remember you well enough that I can tell the difference.”

“Just what is that supposed to mean?”

“You don't hate … any of this.” Emerald made a sweeping gesture with her hands. “If you did, you wouldn't still be here. I've seen you hate Cinder. It's scary, all consuming,” and maybe a little hot. But no way am I leading with that." And there's no way you would still even be on the continent if you hated it here so much.”

“... Yes, alright. I'll give you that much, I… appreciate living in civilization again. Having ingredients that don't come from a can is something I hope to never go without again.”

The admission made Emerald feel lighter somehow, and her smile grew a bit wider at the mention of the woman's hobby. “I'm glad you're cooking, you were always more- I don't know the word, alive? Yourself? Whole, maybe? -after making something. I don't know if you even hate Ruby these days. I haven't seen her this relaxed… maybe ever. And so far as I know she hasn't had a run in with your… dagger's business end yet.” Emerald stumbled a bit, unsure if Cinder had heard the news about her weapon's name yet.

“Well, Fate's been a good girl. Doesn't hurt that Ruby keeps her classroom completely clean somehow. I can't just create her anymore, I need dust to manipulate, if you remember.” She quickly flicked a small twist of glass into being, and placed it on the table like a decorative paperweight, mostly to prove the point probably. “The thought of Ruby running around the room in a Valish Maid outfit and a feather duster just to spite my plans for revenge does crack me up though. Or maybe not Ruby, maybe-” she gave Emerald a playful stink eye ”- Weiss, or even…

Emerald was nearly on the verge of tears from holding back another outburst of laughter, but somehow she managed to tamp it down to a small chuckle.

“Okay. Maybe you hate Yang a bit, fair. But seriously, this is the least hate I've seen in you since… probably the day we fought the Fall Maiden. Maybe that corn town was just what you needed.” A light chuckle answered Emerald, but was oddly cut short as Cinder locked her attention somewhere at the back of the room. Her face read somewhere between respect and disgust, which ranged in the “looking at practically anyone” region of Cinder's expressions. I haven't seen that look in her eye since we were planning the Fall. Usually when Adam was in the room, but he hasn't been around since, what, Haven?

Turning to look, Emerald was immediately reminded of the feature wall behind the register: an entire wall decorated in grimm masks of all sorts and colors, with the focal point being a collection which had clearly seen combat in their lives as White Fang identifiers.

“Emerald. My memory may not be a match for yours, so remind me; that mask in the middle…”

“One of Adam's old lieutenants, 6'3”, dark hair, full face-mask, chain sword.” Emerald prattled off like she was reading a criminal record, or answering an order from Cinder years ago, before catching herself. “We never learned his name back then, but nowadays he prefers ‘Chef Foxtrot.’”

That seemingly shocked Cinder out of her combat-prepared state of mind. “I'm sorry. What?”

“I mean, you could probably call him Bronze if you want, just wait until he's not on the clock to ask; He's a lot like Weiss.”

“You… know his name?” Cinder's brow furrowed, clearly trying to piece together a story from what little information she had to work with.

“I mean, yeah, I come here probably once a week. And he makes some great brisket.” She shrugged. “Had to get the recipe.”

“How?” Right, she hasn't known him outside the mask. Emerald leaned back in her chair.

“I'm guessing you don't mean 'how did you get the recipe?’ Honestly I have no idea, this place was already established by the time they got me. But as for ‘how was he allowed to open a restaurant with his history?’” Emerald shrugged. "Probably the same way two known collaborators with the Queen of Grimm can eat in a little cafe in the center of Vale.”

“Ruby,” The look on Cinder's face was one of familiar defeat. The kind that came with an odd glimmer of hope that maybe the enemy would get sick of winning soon.

“I doubt they'd have started with even just me. All things considered, a low-level terrorist being given a chance at a new life is a lot easier to imagine than either of us getting a second shot.”

“Right. So.” Cinder squared her shoulders, either in recovery or defiance of the world around her; Emerald wasn't sure. “Let's put off the slight crisis I'm about to have until after we place our orders. What do you recommend?”

“Ohh, all the grilled sandwiches are incredible, or if you want something with more produce try the Justice Wrap…”
The food was… Emerald wanted to say it was amazing. It was good without a doubt, but amazing put it on the level of a world-renowned five-star chef. Bronze had some serious skill, but there was just a chasm between what he did and what you might eat in a tailored dress with a matched wine. He didn't take that as an insult though; if anything his smile only got bigger when Cinder compared it to one of the back-alley dive bars she remembered from their time in Mistral.

Bronze Foxtrot really was a loveable capybara of a man though, and Emerald would fight anyone who put his pastry of the day on any pedestal below godly. He had joined them after the two women had finished lunch, vacated their table to browse a small bookstore connected to the Cafe by stint of the building's layout more than intent, and returned after the rush had died down.

“So wait. You left the White Fang to chase tail?”

“Hahaha! Just about.” The large Faunus’ gravelly baritone filled the small restaurant with mirth all on its own as he spoke. “She has spines though. Really, she saved my life I think. Last job I did with our “glorious leader” was ramming that train through the mountain. Met my Tina during the cleanup, she wasn't happy with the Fang for pretty obvious reasons. Practically shouted my goodbyes to the crew, convinced her to run just before the attack on Beacon; and the next thing I know a year's passed and the whole rest of the White Fang leadership is either dead, jailed, or missing.”

“So. How did you end up with this place?” Cinder motioned to the now mostly empty tables “I can't imagine the Kingdom was too forgiving of someone so closely involved. Or, I couldn't if I wasn't sitting here in front of you, I suppose.”

“Aahahaha!” He leaned over conspiratorially, still towering over emerald and failing to actually lower his voice. “Em, you sure this is the same hellion that used to threaten us? She's got the same voice, but no way are they the same person. The sense of humor alone makes it impossible.”

“B, trust me. Same one. Maybe try not to insult her too hard, she's only been in town six months. You remember how long it took me to adjust.”

“Emerald, my weapons are made of glass, not my feelings. I can handle a little banter.” Cinder almost kept a straight face as she took a drink. Almost.

“So to answer your question, it woulda been, I dunno, fifteen years or so ago. All that nasty business in Atlas had wrapped up -The stuff with the SDC leadership, not… all the nasty stuff.- and who else but Chieftain Belladonna's right hand woman comes knocking at my door. Gives me this official looking letter, and walks off. Dunno if you've ever gotten a paper letter delivered…” Bronze waved his hand like he didn't quite know the words he was looking for.

“It had weight. Not just as an object, but like it was important.” Cinder offered, clearly more familiar than Emerald.

“Yeah, weight. Letter was basically a free roundtrip ticket to Menagerie for me and my family. And who was I to say no? Had to show my son the good side of being Faunus, not just the odd glares from strangers, you know?” He paused a bit for a drink, maybe expecting Emerald or Cinder
to sympathize or agree. Neither one ‘knew.’

“Right. So we pack up for a full vacation, head off—and this was just after the Shallows got made into a big deal, so lots of humans were just starting to make the trip out to see the place too—and when we get there, the biggest man I’ve probably ever seen and his wife are there to greet me. Guy notices me, parts the crowd between us, and wraps me a huge bear hug, then offers to carry our bags. Even gave little Copp a ride on his shoulders. About halfway up the steps to the Chieftain's house and I realize ‘I never told him where we were going.’ Turns out the Chief himself came to greet me. And lemme tell ya if you don't know: meeting the person who should by all accounts hate your guts, and them being the friendliest Grimm-kicker you've ever met? Throws you for a loop.”

“Oh trust me.” Cinder rolled her eyes, but not in any way mockingly. “I'm acquainted with the feeling.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you know.” Bronze nodded, maybe seeing something in Cinder's eyes as she said it. “Right then and there, on the steps to his house, the Chief sits me down and just asks how I've been doing. And, I'm not a proud man, so I can admit, I started crying. Not right at that question mind, but it damn near burst that dam on its own. One thing led to another and he tells me that the Kingdoms are starting to put together a plan; let those wrapped up in the whole ugliness get a fresh start, or close to.” He seemed about ready to tear up again. “They needed a few test runs -start small you know?- and my name came up 'cause I already had a family, and hadn't been involved in anything big since before Beacon, but I was still involved in it to a degree.”

“And of course I ask ‘Why?’ and ‘How can this be real?’ just like you probably did. Then this big monster of a man who could probably tear my throat out with his bare hands pulls out his scroll and starts flipping through pictures of his daughter… I'd fought her before. Or at least her Schnee friend. Straight up tried to kill her too. And at that point I knew that everyone I'd hurt, human and Faunus, had a parent with pictures of em growing up. He told me the strongest words I've ever heard then too. More than Sienna's rallies, or Adam's rants. Even more powerful than his own speeches for a equal rights before we started wearing those masks: “It's not about us anymore.” He broke into a dry laugh “Maybe the most my life's ever been like some cheesy feel-good flick, but I knew I couldn't let Copper grow up in a world where his papa was always worried about knocks at the door.”

Cinder's eye flared a bit, like she'd just found some missing piece to a puzzle. “That's… the same thing Ruby told me.”

“Funny how good wisdom seems to stick around. Salem, maybe she got it from the old cat himself; she's part of his daughter's pack after all.”

After that the conversation lightened to more culinary destinations. Emerald knew how to follow recipes, but the crafting of them went over her head enough she mostly stopped paying attention to what was being said, and more who was saying it. Bronze was a good friend since she first met him, really helped her through a rough patch or two. She hoped Cinder wouldn't need the help, but at least it was there if she did. Even if it wasn't coming from Emerald herself.

They wrapped up their afternoon with some deific danishes, and a warm hug from the giant man.

“Don't be strangers. And if you're planning another introduction like you had today let me know, I'll get the red carpet ready.” before ‘whispering’ in Emerald's ear “And if you need a good ‘band, I know a guy who does quality hunter cloth.”

Emerald couldn't feel the cold of the rain, she was fairly sure it was all evaporating from the
heat coming off her face.

Cinder still looked like some cartoon villain though, even with her face full of cannolo.

Chapter End Notes

No excuses on my end. I had plenty of time to write last week and just... Didn't.

Preemptive answers:

Tuesday Night cartoons are the equivalent to our own Saturday Morning, there's a slight reasoning to it but mostly I just enjoyed how odd it sounded. Think Thundercats/Johnny Quest style stuff. Very Hanna Barbera.

Yes, that's Banesaw.

And yes. I do in fact love feedback. Gimme.
Meat Me at the Crossroads

Chapter Summary

The Atlesians were known for their dust mines and engineering of course, but their smoked meats were practically a national treasure to those with the palate for such things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Sorry.” “I'm Sorry.”

Unbelievable: Cinder was late.

Possibly more unbelievable: Cinder cared that she was late. When did that happen?

As she recovered from her brush with the absolute buffoon who had just bumped into her, Cinder found herself hating the Valish architecture just a little more than she normally did. It wasn't so much that she disliked the grandiose castle-like constructions; all brick and similar stacked stone with grand windows that proclaimed a grand view while retaining an almost bullsseye-esque statement of defensible position. It was just that compared to her time in the other kingdoms, the entire Vale system was honestly the worst.

Vacuo liked to keep things rather simple. Mostly single or double-room homes with a windowed dividing wall made up the residence. While public spaces resembled the Valish arched ceilings, it was a practical form to allow for airflow from tube-like vents in the dome ceilings and smaller square vents along which ran along the floor for crossbreeze. What should have been akin to a massive brick oven, instead took the state of a sort of unnatural cavern with a constant summer breeze and a surprising amount of natural light redirected with the clever use of bright cloth. The entire kingdom seemed infused with the same idea if the bright flowing garments which had been popular, at the time of her last visit, were any indication.

Atlas was a stark contrast to both, boxy shapes and harsh lines. Artificial dust lighting was rampant as well; a sad side effect of the longer nights up north. The attire was similarly rigid, though far more intricate in the details than the broad strokes of Vacuo. The atlesian got one thing right in regards to their architecture: they didn't waste space. Unless you could afford the space to waste that is, then you wasted as much as you could just to show off.

Mistral, at least, had sense. Their colors weren't overly vibrant, or their space usage obscene in either direction. They did fall a bit short on the first impressions though. Theirs was a more… subtle form. Entire walls could slide open to reveal mountain vistas or living paintings of forests. Most seasons were spent with as little in the way of unneeded coverage as possible; the intense humidity made for sticky cloth and sweltering shade anyway. At least in the less northern reaches visitors might be lucky to see a local with a covered navel at any time of year.

Vale though… Cinder had so many issues with the labyrinthine too-narrow too-tall hallways, run through with odd intersections and underutilized double doors. The spires and raised walkway bridges were impressive, and served a quite clever purpose. Everything was built around the
precipitation that dominated so much of the year, transforming the rain and snow runoff into a part of the design. During the drier seasons however, Vale just seemed intent to be too many things at once.

She had to admit she enjoyed the tea-and-blanket weather; and the fashion it brought. Good waterproof accessories were a distinctly Valish tradition, to the point even feathers held up in the otherwise ruinous climate. Even if Emerald made fun of Cinder “showing her inner villainess” she had to appreciate the craftsmanship if nothing else.

Still, Cinder was late. And she couldn't even blame Ruby for this one; it was Thursday after all. The woman was meticulous about Cinder's schedule when she was around; but on the two days she didn't demand just shy of perfection, she let Cinder completely unguided except for the occasional note left on her desk with vague directions like ‘Restock 14’ or ‘Jaune. 9. Thurs.’ and one time just ‘Jumping Jacks, 10:30.’ Cinder had discovered the second of which after arriving slightly behind schedule today, and given Ruby's complete lack of attendance on the day in question panicked a bit as the clock read 8:50 when she looked up.

So here she was, bumping into dumb redheads in the hallways that made no sense, about to be late for a meeting she didn't know she had until it was almost too late. To make matters worse, of course, there was also a particular ex-subordinate of hers also in the area.

Unfortunately, it wasn't Emerald. She at least often seemed happy to see Cinder. Unlike Mercury, who either hadn't grown out of his grousing stage, or maybe he didn't like Cinder to begin with.

Hard to tell with some people.

Mercury had changed a bit over the years, but that wasn't so surprising. He had a beard these days, bushy but relatively short and well kept. A few extra scars had been added to his collection as well. He looked part and parcel like he had spent time surviving in the wilderness for a bit too long, except for his eyes which still were as cold and calculating as ever. His style too, had changed. No long, baggy pants hid his prosthetic like they once had; instead he maintained the “baggy” but regulated it to zip-off cargo shorts. Which fashion-wise maybe wasn't exactly an improvement, but he had never much cared for fitting in to trends.

Case in point: he was currently walking around inside barefoot while carrying a pair of boots by their laces strung across his shoulder. His legs were certainly more streamlined and lifelike than they had once been, but knowing just what had changed at a glance wasn't her strong suit. They mostly just looked more like regular feet than they once had, instead of the giant hydraulic pistons with shoe-shaped platforms. There was still plenty of Function over Fashion, but they at least looked like the doctor who had built and installed them hadn't been doing so under threat of his family's life.

Funny how that had a specific style, really it was.

As Mercury made his way towards Cinder, she half expected him to stop and say some witty comment, or act like a protective older brother for Emerald. Maybe Cinder expected him to at least glance at her and scoff before walking away to leave her feeling dejected or remorseful. As it was he just hummed a tune reminiscent of a children’s movie, and went on his merry way into a recently-arrived elevator. He had made eye contact, even offered a small nod of recognition, but not much else.

Cinder didn't know how she felt about the near complete lack of reaction to her.
They had come across one another on a few occasions. Usually in the presence of others, but occasionally they would both be alone after a meeting or find themselves both waiting for coffee in the teacher's lounge. Cinder certainly wasn't avoiding the man, and for all appearances he didn't go out of his way to not talk to her, they just didn't really have anything to talk about. Which was a bit ironic given how for the past several months it seemed Cinder had talked to, and learned the life story, of nearly everyone she met.

Checking her scroll for the time, Cinder noted that she was well within the acceptable range of late, it was two minutes past nine, and only those with the largest sticks should have been bothered by that fact. Suffice to say Cinder was her own worst enemy today.

As she opened the door to Jaune's office, she took in the rather simple decor that the man surrounded himself with. With fame like his, and connections to boot, he could probably have had an entire wing dedicated to a cavernous workplace. Or even an office which gazed out towards the city and accompanying bay. Instead he had a cozy little place on the third floor of a building which overlooked the Forever Fall though a distinctly Mistrali window; a single, large pane of glass which took up the majority of the wall, ending at roughly thigh-height to make space for an efficient lounging area. The rest of the room was uncluttered and uncramped, but made smaller by the addition of large bookshelves and a beautifully crafted wooden desk. Three comfortable looking chairs were spaced around the left end of the room, in front of the desk but beside the window, while behind the desk only one rather standard-looking office chair sat with its owner looking through a collection of files and papers.

Jaune didn't react to her entrance, but also didn't jump when she knocked on the door after a moment waiting. His brow did furrow a bit at the sight of her, but it passed quickly and his face lit up with a welcoming smile.

"Cinder" he greeted her as he stood "I wasn't expecting you here for another twenty minutes or so. What brings you down early?"

"Oh? Ruby left me a note for nine" Cinder held up the small square of paper in support "Though I can't imagine it taking that long to make the trip." at least in any situation where I'm not practically sprinting because I think I'm late .

Jaune gave a small dismissive shrug as he offered her a seat in front of the desk. “Maybe she just figured something would come up on the way. Errand or something.”

“Yes, well,” Cinder sighed in outward annoyance but inward relief “I suppose that means I'm just here early instead. What did you need me for? The staff meeting isn't for another hour or so, and it's Thursday anyway.”

“Nothing really, at least officially.” his broad shoulders and strong face didn't show a hint of nervousness “I mostly just wanted to ask you to dinner soon, and it's easier to schedule small meetings like this than try to track down anyone not tied to a classroom in this place. Bring them to me, you know?”

Cinder faked a gasp “Mister Arc, fraternizing with a subordinate? For shame sir! What would the children think?” she stifled the oncoming giggle.

Did I really just giggle? Not even a dry laugh. That was straight out of a schoolgirl gossip circle.

“Well, I did mean a coworkers, Miss Fall . But, you're also not my subordinate.” the man seemed unfazed by the statement, but grinned almost predatorily at the un-Cinderlike sound afterwards “You don't even work in my department after all. If Ruby were to start making moves
on you… well she has much scarier things to worry about than some misconduct paperwork in that case. Three things, to be exact.”

“Not that I’ve ever been one for sticking it to the man, but yes. Dinner sounds good. I can’t say I know very many places to eat in the area—” Cinder had somehow just not eaten out in the last several months. At least nothing that wasn’t takeout or delivery. She preferred to cook for her own tastes anyway.

“Oh, no. My place. Bit hard to talk over other patrons besides. Plus, I’ve been wanting to try my new atlesian smoker, and it seems a waste to not share.”

Cinder could feel her mouth watering already. The Atlesians were known for their dust mines and engineering of course, but their smoked meats were practically a national treasure to those with the pallette for such things. Easily within the same realm of speciality as Valish wines and, as a recent addition to Cinder's Hall of Fame, Menagerian fish.

“I don't suppose you mean tonight?” Please mean tonight. Please mean tonight. “Because at this point, you're just teasing me with the promise of being stuffed with meat I can't have. And that, dear Jaune, is a rude thing to do to a woman.”

He leaned back in his chair, and considered. “Hmmm. Now that you mention it. I did start a brisket this morning. And I'm pretty sure Nora's on a diet right now, so no hope of help from her or Ren…” Jaune gave a wink “I think it may be more than we can take, at least without making leftovers for a while. And that, as I'm sure you're aware, is just criminal.”

“Now. Where could you find someone with such a background in avoiding such extreme charges?” Cinder jokingly tapped her chin as she waited a beat. “Oh wait. That's me. Tonight then? Sounds like you're in a rush to get me to taste such succulent meat. Really get a taste of that juicy cut. It almost sounds romantic; just you, me, and several pounds between us.” Cinder let the words roll out, though she wasn't quite sure if she was doing so teasingly, or authentically after a point.

“Oh, not just us.” Oh. Well that put a small damper on Cinder's more… primal plans for tonight. “I do live with my partner, like most every non-solo Huntsmen, Miss Fall. And she'll probably want some too. We do share most everything with each other.” and the deranged plans became downright degenerate.

“I'll be there.” Cinder stood from her seat. “Will I have time to make a stop at home? It feels wrong sharing a meal without bringing my own offering to the table.” Old habits die hard, and that was one family tradition Cinder appreciated keeping around. Plus she was not dressed for red meat today; Valish waterproof engineering only did so much against stains unfortunately.

“Of course.” Jaune accompanied her to the door. “The smoke won't be done until later, seven or eight. Plenty of space on the table too.”

“Seven-thirty it is.”

And with that Cinder made her way out of the office, and back towards her own little slice of campus. She had to maintain a watch over the workbenches and Catalogue usage today, since Ruby was unavailable to do so. At least she usually had some nice quiet time, even when students came to work.

A few upperclassmen had come by to try getting help over the past several weeks, and she had even managed to assist a few of them. Mostly structural issues for those who had to build each weapon from scratch. A few were more about technique, those were much easier to discover but
harder to actually help fix. Each student who left her desk with a smile did help Cinder see just why someone might want to teach as a career. Maybe not in a full lecture hall, but the idea of tutoring one-on-one wasn't terrible to her at least.

As Cinder rounded the last corner, she unfortunately wasn't paying enough attention to notice a man carting a large desk past her. Or rather she noticed he was moving something large and heavy, and merely stepped out of the way without really looking at what it was.

Upon entering the classroom, she noticed something wasn't quite right. It wasn't obvious until she went over to her desk and attempted to sit that the sense of incorrectness really hit her. She had to climb into her chair, instead of plopping down onto it like normal. Then she had to adjust the chair to get the desk at the right height to lean over it.

That was about the point she noticed that her desk was no longer a standard teacher's desk from the stockroom, but a significantly larger piece. So large, in fact, that she could probably have sold the space it took up as a sleeping-pod apartment in Atlas proper. Appearance wise, it was a startlingly good recreation of her normal desk, just scaled up. It even had a sticky lower drawer rail. And all of her files, papers, and other assorted items right where they should be.

As she pondered just how someone had recreated her desk three times it's normal size, she tapped her pen- That doesn't sound quite right. In fact, it sounded completely unlike plastic striking the wood of a desk should sound. So much so that Cinder brought it up to her face and tried to bend the offending writing tool. It broke with minimal effort and revealed itself to be chocolate throughout. Delicious, slightly bitter dark chocolate to be exact.

Cinder wished she could claim this was strange; finding miscellaneous items replaced with foodstuffs really should have been outside the realm of normalcy after all. Fortune, much like Mercury's taste in pranks, was rarely to Cinder's liking. This had all the tell-tale signs of that inventive, but ultimately fairly uncreative, buffoon's handiwork. With Ruby out of contact, it also removed her from the equation almost completely.

However, for the sake of not being sent back to the small town of Misir, a name she had spent decades of her life specifically not remembering, Cinder had to remain at the least easily reachable in case a student needed access to the workbenches and, as of recently, the dust mixer (heavily monitored of course).

So, here she sat at her too-large desk in a too-empty room, wanting to lightly strangle a certain too-smug face. Cinder figured she may as well figure out what she could bring for dinner later, at least she planned to do that but somehow ended up in a back and forth with Emerald over their scrolls. She was apparently interested in the dull day-to-day which had pervaded the small farming village of Cinder's hell. Asking what Cinder remembered of her routine, and foods she had attempted (hopefully in order to avoid them during future meals together.)

Cinder found her hours passing quickly as she traded stories with the green-haired woman, built her plans for revenge, lusted over promised brisket, and assisted a student who had somehow managed to get the hem of their skirt trapped in a manual-tighten vice.

She spent the entire time not wondering how she had come care about these events. Cinder instead found herself looking forward to the coming hours and days in a way she had never quite managed since her childhood.

Life was funny like that.
Beep Beep, it's been 3 weeks.

To those who care: apologies for the silence, Life, as they say, uhhh finds a way (to fuck up all your plans)

This chapter feels the strangest to me, I'm not sure why really. it just doesn't sit in my head the same way as most.

Big Yell for Yell Head, doing betas and such.

Gimme dat sweet rearfood though, I need it for science.
Weekday at Taiyang's

Chapter Summary

Thus Eternally We Venture.

Chapter Notes

Big ole' yell to Yell Head for their amazing beta

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ruby Rose stared into the endless blue abyss, and it stared right back.

The view out the window the the airship was pretty okay too, she guessed.

But really, what kind of wife would Ruby be if she didn't take the time every once in a while to lose herself in the eyes of one of the women she had promised to be with forever? A pretty oblivious one, probably. But in her defence, Weiss had been pretty clueless to the possibility for the first several years too.

Weiss “And Just What Is That Supposed To Mean?” Rose-Schnee. Quite possibly the most beautiful person Ruby had ever met, outside the other members of her family. Her sister Yang, and… what did Blake count as? It was a common enough question from those unfamiliar with their situation; but to Ruby, Blake was just ‘wife.’ Certainly not ‘second wife,’ that implied a lesser relationship; or that Weiss had left the equation. To the legal system (and the VRS; someone had to keep track of taxes, after all) Blake was a sister in-law. Married to Ruby's half-sister, under the authority of the Menagerian— Gah! This rabbit hole just keeps going down, doesn't it? I know they elect a leader, but their head of state is a chief, so is it a monarchy? I think they have their own council... —

“Ruby, do you remember our wedding?”

Well, that was a dumb question. A welcome, dumb question though, since it saved Ruby from trying to figure out the political system of a country she was maybe-almost royalty in. Of course she remembered their wedding, all three of them.

“Which one?” Ruby turned her seat towards her once-and-future partner, and asked with a lovingly mocking tone, “Because my memory may be a bit fuzzy around the one in Atlas, all the alcohol will do that to a young lady.”

Weiss gave a textbook-perfect example of an unamused smile. “The important one, Dolt. Specifically the vows,” she said, muttering afterwards, “and you don’t drink.” The insult had no venom behind it, at this point it was just a pet name on the same level as Ruby calling her ‘Snowflake.’ That pout of hers was still the cutest thing Ruby had possibly ever seen though, even trumping their daughter's most days.
'Important' did narrow it down, actually. The fancy-pants hullabaloo which had been insisted upon by Atlesian noble tradition wasn't really a wedding so much as a fashion show and poetry recital, there wasn't even an Officiant at that one. There was the legal wedding they had in a countryside courtroom with only Yang, Nora, and Winter in attendance as witnesses. Finally, the Hunter (or in this particular case Huntress ) wedding in the woods of Patch; with all their friends and most of their families invited and dressed up, but not fancy . That had been the best one, in Ruby's opinion.

All three of them were “important” in her eyes, but Weiss knew that. Of course, that didn't mean Ruby couldn't poke fun at her a bit for asking.

So, Ruby began reciting her “traditional” Atlesian vows, prepared to fill in for Weiss' lines as needed:

“As now our Houses join, may we prosper to greater heights together than apar—”

Weiss’ glare could probably melt its way into a Relic's Vault. “You know that's not what I meant. The real ones, Ruby. Not whatever ‘traditional’”— Weiss punctuated the word with actual finger quotes, “poem that was commissioned less than a decade before, by some snobby investor to flaunt their money.”

Ruby gave her best over-the-top pout —with fully articulated hand-on-heart action! Buy your Ruby Rose homestyle doll today!— “They're all real. I meant every word of every one of my vows. Even the dumb ones.” Ruby paused for a second, before pointing her finger in the direction of Weiss. “Actually. Scratch that. Especially the dumb ones.”

That got a genuine smile out of Weiss. “And I wouldn't have it any other way.” she leaned across the small gap between them and gave Ruby a peck on the lips. Mission: Snowflake Kisses is a success. I repeat: Snowflake Kisses is a success. As Ruby continued to grin like an idiot at the display of affection, Weiss waited patiently for the woman’s brain activity to resume normal function.

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end. Even imaginary, celebratory brain-champaign. Ruby might not indulge in the bottle, but that didn't mean she didn't get a little drunk on the rush that came from every bit of contact with her loved ones. And it was a bad idea to quit anything cold-turkey for a reason. Unfortunately that meant Ruby would have to survive more kisses, hugs, snuggles, and handholding. What a terrible fate.

Weiss leaned back into her seat before refreshing the subject. “So I take it you probably have the entire Schnee family tree memorized still?”

Ruby had to think for a moment about her answer. She had a pretty good memory when it came to important things, but the dry listing of a lineage was among the most boring things she had ever experienced in her life. “If you need me to remember it, you know I'll do my best.” Ruby began tracing the snowflake buckle of her belt as she nervously started listing a series of names to an old nursery rhyme,

“Whitley, Winter, Weiss, and Willow, Jacques who married in~. Nicholas, his wife Bianca, then her mom named Lynn—”

Weiss gently stopped the mnemonic with a hand to Ruby's shoulder, and a smile full of mirth. “That was a joke , Ruby. I do appreciate the attempt, but no, I don't need you to sing my family line for me.”
Ruby sighed in relief at the news. “Good. Because I forgot the next verse. I was just about to start making up names and hope they were close.” That, of course, got Weiss to smile for real again. *Worth it.*

“Well, I *was* wondering about a specific part, but now I think I’d like to hear you say the entirety of the vows you wrote.” Weiss put on her full Heiress posture—face neutral, back perfectly arched, legs crossed, hands folded in her lap except to motion Ruby into action. “Entertain me, plebeian.” To anyone not familiar with the dynamic, it looked like Weiss really was a royal holding court with Ruby as her minstrel. But to the two of them it was a familiar back and forth. Ruby grinned as she gave a deep bow —or as deep a bow as she could while remaining in her seat anyway. “As My Lady wishes.

*I, Ruby Rose,*

*Accept this bond in all its forms*

*I swear not 'till the end of the world.' for we have surpassed it*

*I swear not 'till the return of the brother gods.' for we have met them*

*I swear by the strength of my soul, and the power of my spirit.*

*By the heart of my blade, and of my body.*

*Though they may break or change across the years; they will be forged anew.*

*As our Aura joins, so too shall our lives.*

*As our Colors join, so too does our time.*

*Thus it is in accepting this bond we achieve unity.*

*Its meaning is personal, but it's purpose is clear:*

*Ever on we will move forward, hand-in-hand.*

*We will slip, stumble, and fall.*

*Just as we will support, catch, and lift in answer.*

*Thus Eternally We Venture.*

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Owning a private airship was really one of those luxuries you could never quite wrap your head around until you lived it. There was the issue of upkeep but once you had the ability to have anything that complex custom-built, that was less than pocket change. The RWBY-family Airship, christened *The Corvid*, was one such custom made monstrosity.

It had a fully functional cockpit, but was most often operated by a fork of the Polendina Electronic Navigation Artificial Intelligence (PEN-AI, for short), “hand” crafted by Doctor (Penny) Polendina herself for exactly the range of operations needed for Hunter operations; team RWBY’s personalized seed preferred to be called Cash. *The Corvid*, with the addition of Cash, could takeoff, land, evade most airborne threats, and even navigate international customs near-autonomously if the situation required. Using its four top of the line, Monsoon-3 dust engines, the ship could theoretically carry the weight of a small Goliath through anything short of a category 4 tornado. Mostly Cash was used for quick flights to and from mission locations, as Blake’s primary mode of transportation for her consultation practices, or in the case of today: to make a three hour trip to patch in under forty minutes to allow maximum time with family.

The seats even had two cup holders apiece.

As Ruby stepped off the ramp and into the slightly muggy late morning air of mid-autumn Patch, she took a deep breath of her childhood home. The house in the woods had been added onto a bit, but outwardly it still looked the same. The area encircling it, on the other hand, was greatly
enlarged since her years attending beacon as a student. It held a small private landing pad, a large
guesthouse, and a fully equipped yard intended for pre-combat school training and medically-
required “downtime” practice. There wasn’t a Hunter alive who actually listened to doctor-
recommended ‘bed rest’ or ‘taking it slow for a few days while you heal’ retired or otherwise.
Strangely enough, there also weren’t that many Hunters who lived to see old age.

That deep breath was then immediately tested as she took Weiss’ hand and launched the two of
them out into the space and around several obstacles that weren’t, strictly speaking, in the most
direct line of travel between the Corvid and the front door of the Xiao Long residence. Weiss was,
of course, used to the sudden jumps from standstill to semblance-enhanced “petal-to-the-metal”
speeds.

Once upon a time it had been hard for Ruby to propel herself for longer than a second or two,
even without Crescent Rose, but that had been when she was first learning the ins and outs. Like all
semblances, training and practice allowed for both an increased reservoir of energy to utilize, and
new tricks and intricacies to be found within the range of the ability.

Yang, for instance, could channel her semblance’s output into just about anything she could
touch these days; a skill which greatly increased her range of available weaponry and allowed for
her to “share” a sliver of her increased strength to others. It had opened up several new
combinations and possibilities for the team, and been instrumental in the success of several
missions. Blake and Weiss had improved similarly, in both range and scope of application.

Blake’s shadow clones, where once they were mostly one-and-done copies with a limited
physical existence, now the woman could hold a small handful for extended periods of time. They
also were solid enough to perform all sorts of relatively long-term tasks—from washing dishes or
folding laundry, to defusing bombs and picking locks; Blake could probably crew a large boat on
her own if she wanted. They also had more personal applications when the need called for it.

Weiss had always had a well-trained semblance, her glyphs were already an evolution of her base
semblance, and her summons were a major hurdle to overcome in her younger years. Her list of
applications had grown alongside her capacity to use them. That slow, methodical growth fit her
personality well though.

Ruby, honestly hadn’t put much time into increasing what she could do, but instead poured her
energy into how well she could do it. She could carry a small handful of people along for the ride,
or produce a storm of her signature petals without running in circles for several minutes, but for the
most part she was just fast. So fast, in fact, that her passengers often had trouble breathing. Which
came back to her speed-addled mind in the form of Weiss tapping Ruby on the neck to remind her.

Oops.

The rush of having the space to just go was addicting, but not to the point of endangering the
chances of kisses later. So Ruby landed the two of them near to the front door of the main
residence as quickly as she dared. Kicking up a small cloud of dust in the process, and nearly
landing face first into the ground. Luckily, as always, Weiss was there in Ruby’s time of need and
cought her with a glyph before any actual impact occurred. Somehow she had managed a poise-
perfect landing in wedges while Ruby was trying her hardest to belly flop.

“Saved your life,” the guardian angel of Ruby’s beautiful face declared with humor apparent in
her voice, “but next time maybe don’t try to stick the landing with your face.”

“Are you sayin—” Ruby grinned as she twisted in the hold of the spinning snowflake to look at
her Snowflake, “that you just like me for my good looks?”
“Yes.” Ruby could swear the woman's poker face was actually chiseled from a block of ice. Her voice so perfect in its delivery that it could be a mail service. Her eyes so beautiful they could b—

Weiss dropped her the remaining distance to the ground.

“Oof”

The door to the home then opened to reveal a man who had clearly never quite heard that old men were supposed to lose their youthful good looks. “Hey, there's my girls!” a beaming grin splitting Taiyang Xiao Long’s wizened face “Or, half of you anyway. Hope Blake feels better soon.”

Ruby, having successfully risen from her dirt bed, was the first to leap into action. “Dad!” she yelled as she tackled him as fast as her semblance would allow in such a short distance.

Weiss, on the other hand, was much more reserved in her approach. She still practically leapt into a hug, just not without the velocity of her soul to assist. “Hey dad.”

Tai’s smile had only been larger five times in his life. The day team STRQ had been bound together, the days Yang and Ruby had been born, the day team RWBY had been bound together, and the day he had married——

“Honey, come outside. The girls are here.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh hey. it's been a while. my bad

Heads up, expect a decent break before my next chapter, I'm moving next week and have no idea when I'll get my writing couch back.

as always, I live for feedback, please give.
Emerald honestly felt pretty good about today when she woke up this morning.

The sun had been… not shining, but visible, which was always a nice break from Vale’s rainy season. Weiss wasn’t in the office, as was tradition on Thursdays. Ruby was also out of town, which meant no need to keep her out of Weiss’ office. All told, this morning had been wonderfully pleasant.

Just, currently she felt like she might or might not be staring at death itself. In the red, bloodshot eyes of death to be specific. Trying very hard to ignore the terribly contradictory runny/stuffy state of death’s nose.

Also Yang was there.

If anything, Yang being around was actually the most normal part of the current situation. Seeing as she was currently doting on her sick partner, the inclusion of Yang was to be expected. The truly unexpected, honestly kind of terrifying, part of the ordeal was that Yang’s partner was bedridden to begin with.

Or more realistically, that she was sick at all. Emerald couldn’t actually remember the last time her feline-heritaged friend had been lain low by something so mundane as mere sickness. Even including the year Emerald had pretended to be friends with them.

To say the sight of the woman tucked into bed, surrounded by tissues, and blankly watching daytime interlink was strange was an understatement.

It was downright disturbing.

“D’orree do ak you do com’ ober,” well, that answers the question of runny or stuffy at least. "bud ya’g will worg herself do dhe bonde oderwise. Aldo we needed domeone do wa-a- a-chooo!... Ughh.” with the last sneeze, the state of Blake's nose was once again in question. Her willingness to speak had apparently left her body alongside the mucus though.

“What my lovely quarter is trying to say, is ‘thanks for watching Brennan today.’ Also ‘Yang is a wonderful wife and partner who absolutely can handle a sick Blake and watching our kid at the same time’” Yang said warmly from the side of the ludicrously large bed, had it belonged to any other family. “If you don't want to hang around me and Mrs. ‘I never get sick’—” Yang lightly prodded Blake in the side as she teased. “here all day, don't feel like you have to.”

Honestly the thought of going out hadn't even crossed Emerald's mind. Having any excuse to come over and see her friends and godchild was a welcome one, present sickness excluded. But
now that it was brought up she had to admit the idea of a day on the town sounded like a great way to spend an otherwise empty day. “Later for sure, but I wanted to talk to you all anyway first. Health allowing, that is.”

Blake somehow managed a melting glare with her face buried in a tissue. “You dow you cand alw—”

“Kitty, please. Nobody wants to hear you try to talk through enough snot to flood a small kingdom” The jokingly slighted ‘glare’ directed at Emerald became something far sharper as it snapped towards Yang, before promptly reminding its owner why snapping your head while sick was a very bad idea. Yang's brief moment of pride was quickly swallowed up by frankly overbearing concern for Blake's wellbeing.

The sight was adorable and heart-wrenching for Emerald all at once. She felt a pang of envy directed towards both women equally, but she just as quickly squashed the feeling back into the hole it crawled out from. That same pit, unfortunately, was the same one she stared into every time she saw anyone in a lasting romantic relationship.

Yang, finally finished with her doting and fretting, but only at Blake's insistence that she wasn't about to explode without constant pillow adjustments and enough vitamin C to medically count as the first Faunus/Citrus blood transfusion. “—yes, okay, it's not like she doesn't already know how t — Ah! Was that really necessary? Fine, but you need bed rest”

Emerald found the oddly one-sided conversation sweet. Though if she hadn't known the women for as long as she had, she might consider it sickeningly so. Blake had somehow managed to speak entire sentences to Yang with silent motions; and a single playful slap that, had Emerald been anyone else... actually, knowing those two, it wouldn't have mattered if they'd been giving a speech at a funeral. Maybe Yang could just read Blake so well she didn't need more than that. But ass-slaps aside, Emerald did have a question, and cleared her throat to remind the two she was there at all.

It was a hard-learned lesson on Emerald’s part.

Finally turning her attention back towards Emerald, Yang gave her best warm, accepting smile alongside a roll of her eyes slightly pointed at her found piece. “So, who finally caught your eye?”

Emerald's entire mental metro derailed all at once. Not a single train or even a two-locomotive collision either. Whole thing. Not a single thought ran through her head for a solid moment. Of course, once they started back again it was mass pandemonium. Every track and engine suddenly trying to find the way to the same destination from a thousand angles. To call the resulting loss of thought-life less than a tragedy would be disrespectful to all those who had fallen alongside Beacon. The entire event lead to a single endpoint, a word that somehow escaped the twisted pile of memory and thought. One of the most useful words in recorded history even.

What?

Yang's smile grew even wider as Emerald had a small breakdown in front of her. Fortunately, she wasn't one to laugh at another's misfortune without at least trying to help them with it first. “Hey, it's not some big secret that you've been... happier, recently?” Emerald quickly found herself wrapped in a warm hug as she stared like a deer into headlights. “We just want to know who we need to snap like a twig if they ever break your heart.”

“I-it's not like that!” What? No. Nononono. No. Nope. Not telling Yang anything. She'd probably find a way to make Salem look merciful if I ever... If They ever... “I just... I've known
you girls for years and I realized I just never… I guess I'm just curious how you four ever, you know, figured it all out.” Emerald was not asking for relationship advice.

Absolutely not asking. She was merely inquiring about how some of her closest friends had fallen in love… and fallen in love again twice more… and then didn't fall apart as either friends, family, or people in a more romantic relationship. For scientific reasons, of course. No personal gain to be had whatsoever.

Nothing wrong with a little professional curiosity after all.

Yang smiled and shook her head in a way that told Emerald just how poorly she had recovered. Luckily she didn't push the subject, even if she probably wanted to. Blake looked like she was trying not to laugh, though whether out of respect for Emerald or a respect for the pain from her headache was unclear. Emerald was thankful for small miracles like her friend not dying of laughter from something as ridiculous as her terrible social recovery.

“That's a long story. There's probably someone better than me that could tell you the whole thing like a history book” Yang fiddled with her bandana set as she seemed to mull something over “Realms, I think there's actually a kids book about it. Maybe not us specifically, but I think the newer prints of The Biggest Hug are colored a bit differently than the copy in dad's attic” Yang gave a shrug as if being so famous that existing literature was rewritten to reference you was normal.

For her it probably was.

Yang, of course, never let it phase her. She continued “First things first: Don't do it how we did. Hypothetically that is. Bad idea” she punctuated the command with her index finger to Emerald's forehead. “I didn't even start thinking about Blakey in a romantic way until… wait. No. Let me start over. Just to get this out of the way, how do you think we started out?”

Emerald wouldn't lie and say she'd never thought about the subject. Most people with an ounce of media awareness knew something of the relationship the four shared. Everyone had their own little theories about the period between the Fall of Beacon, and the restoration of the Vale CCT, the ‘true story’ of the Witchhunters especially. Emerald definitely knew more than most, given her direct involvement with nearly every major event during that time, but she'd been on the wrong side of the fight to have paid attention to her then-enemy's love lives. Still, Emerald remembered more than most too.

“I know… none of you really showed signs until after—” Emerald stumbled a bit. Even after all these years it sounded weird to talk about the time she'd helped assault one of the four latest cities across the kingdoms. “after Beacon. I don't think Haven either, but that night’s a bit fuzzy” semblance migraines were honestly the worst thing. Intense pain and an inability to clearly remember any events for at least an hour in either direction.

“Then the next time I saw you, in Atlas. maybe? We were fighting mostly. There were a few times when I was— err, I guess spying isn't the worst thing I've done, is it?— you and Blake were close. You and Ruby sometimes, but you're family. Sometimes her and Blake, or Weiss. But you're teammates, partne—.”

Yang thankfully stopped her before she could go much further into her checkered past of semblance-assisted photographic memory. “Hey. Woah. Slow down there, Matinee. You could write a your own history book with that level of detail.”

“I-I don't—”
“Yeah. I know you don't write like that. But do you have any idea how many crazy ideas I've heard? Somebody's gonna get it right eventually; infinite typewriters, and all that.” Yang turned to face the black-haired booger beast behind her back. “Speaking of, how's Sun doing these days?”

Yang promptly got a high velocity kiss from a pillow.

As Yang recovered from the downy doming, Emerald was recovering from the burst of laughter it had caused her. Even when barely able to stand, Blake could apparently still knock Yang off her feet.

“Right, right. Talk shit; get hit. Anyway: How We Did It, The Movie!” Blake snickered a bit at the cheesy, slightly hamfisted segue. “First things first, it wasn't all at once. It took years for any of us to figure anything out. I had to lose my gods-damned arm before I even started thinking about Blake as more than just an Academy partner. Then Ruby and Weiss got close, but they didn't really figure that out until Weiss lost her—” Yang had a look like she'd just discovered the back of the textbook held all the answers to her homework for the year. “Maidsens, I think all four of us have a thing.”

“I like my women with a liddle less meat on der bones. Plus all de exdra feadures” Blake interjected during a brief post-blow moment of nasal clarity.

Yang playfully flexed her mechanical arm, then wiggled her fingers a bit to punctuate before returning her attention to Emerald. “Long story short, we were young, dumb, confused, and unstoppably horny for the beginning of the whole thing. Those aren't great foundations for any long term relationship. We all lived with our little crushes for years before any of us actually tried talking about it. Then it was a whole heap of awkward because we'd already set up with each other.”

“So how did you work it out? I've messed up when there was one other person to worry about. Like, a lot.” Emerald rubbed her arm self consciously as she spoke. Slowly drawing into herself at the admission.

“Oh, that's the easy part, in theory anyway. We talked to each other, about everything.” Yang threw her hands wide in punctuation. “It’s the little things, all the dumb issues you normally would let slide, that do lasting damage to your relationship. Is one of us using a deodorant that reminds Weiss of her less-than-stellar childhood? Sad Weiss, Sad Life. Did Blake buy that weird brand of butter for a recipe she wants to try? No, she just saw it was healthier than our usual stuff. Maybe Ruby did a cool thing with a dust mixture. That’s way over my head, but I can still be excited that she’s excited” Yang took a second to think. “Just make sure you’re honest about that stuff too. Tell them ‘I don’t really get it, but I’m excited for you,’ or something.”

She held up two fingers as she moved to her next topic. “Ask ‘stupid’ questions. All of them. From ‘How do you like your coffee’ when you can’t remember, to ‘How was work?’” She leaned in almost conspiratorially. “Even when you maybe don’t actually want to know. All those dumb little questions let you understand who they are better than just assumption and experience. Took me years to learn that Weiss never used the deodorant I would pack for hunts, would bring her own and just add unnecessary weight to her pack. ‘Till one day I asked the stupid question of ‘Why not?’ . You’re never going to get answers to questions you don’t ask.”

Yang put a supportive hand on Emerald’s shoulder as she locked eyes and continued “Set boundaries. For you, and them. Things like ‘my pillow’ or ‘I’m not comfortable wearing that’. It sounds kinda harsh, but you’ve gotta draw that line somewhere. Do it early, and let them know if it changes in either direction. You should feel comfortable not confined.” Yang let her hand fall away as she finished.
“We communicate. It gets easier, but at first? Let's just say I'm lucky Ruby even looks at me after those first few months” Yang gave no impression she was joking. Not even a playful smirk flashed across her features. “If you're asking for advice though, I'll warn you now. It's not for everyone. Even if you can find the right people, and they're also interested in the idea, it's not ‘normal’ for a reason, Emerald. Not just because it’s kinda hard, all this stuff applies with any number of people involved. Pairs don’t have it worse or better, and more people doesn’t mean it’s better. We know one—” Yang paused as she searched for a word “octet, maybe? There’s eight of them. It works for them, but I can’t imagine being happy like that. Just like maybe you can’t imagine being happy with more than one person. Don’t hurt yourself trying to fit into something you don’t want because you want it to work.”

“I-... I don't think I was considering it. But if I ever do I'll try to remember that. I was mostly asking how you first really knew, but I guess you kinda answered that didn't you?” Emerald had learned much more about trying to juggle multiple relationships than she had expected this morning. Not that it was a bad thing, just... maybe not exactly relevant to her situation. At least, she didn’t think it was.

“Oh that's a great story!” Yang gave an excited clap, followed quickly by a wince at just how loud it was in the otherwise quiet room. “We were all out on a hunt, I had packed some extra stuff for a celebration meal. So when I whipped it out to start cooking, Weiss stalks right up and full on kisses me” her face broke into a huge, almost drunken smile. “Then she does that ‘I was raised eating diamonds for snacks’ looks she has, and just goes “Yang Xiao Long. I love you.” Ruby seemed fine with it, and Blake—”

“Ya’g. Eberald doen't deed do know” Blake mercifully stopped the, knowing Yang, lecherous story in its tracks. “Guick! -Hnnk- escape before she starts trying to show you baby pictures and videos from our honeymoon!”

Emerald hadn't heard a better idea all day. Once Yang got started on something, it was always hard to stop her. So she took the advice with a tactical “I'll take care of Brennan once he gets out of school. You—” Emerald pointed an accusatory finger at Blake. “just focus on getting better” as she slipped away from the den of tissues and stories— both of which were more than likely dirty.

So. We're to take a nine year old on a Thursday afternoon? Whitley should be in Vale this week, which means Kalt is in town, and Henna's always up for a playdate. but school still needs to let out first... Everyone else is probably busy with work or out of town. So how can I kill a few hours? Emerald ran through several possibilities, from solo laser tag (not a great look) to maybe a Cafe lunch (maybe in a bit) when her Scroll buzzed with a message.

C: know any good places to find fresh cheeses? Need brie for recipe.

Well. Emerald could think of worse ways to spend time than chatting with Cinder, and apparently go shopping at the same time.

Emerald had a pretty good feeling about the rest of today, actually. The sun wasn't shining, but it was visible through the otherwise oppressive cloud cover. Maybe, Emerald would take a chance to just ask. But for the moment, she was communicating.

At least a little bit.
This chapter has been brought to you by the Color: Burn.

Heyooo new house, same me.

This one required a lot of input from Yell Head (who, by the by, is known as WhatOtherWorld on Ao3, and is writing his own pollination Fic, It Might Even Be Great. highly recommend)

Comment, share, and scream pointlessly into the void, please.
Out to market, out to pasture

Chapter Summary

Cinder wallowed in silent defeat from trying to find some insult or name that wasn't completely juvenile to level at the young boy...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cinder Fall was thirsty.

That shouldn't even have been possible, surrounded as she was by all sorts of foods and refreshments. Yet somehow, her green-haired guide was ignoring all the wonderful drinks and quenching fruits as she wove her way through this strange, food-filled labyrinth which sprawled beneath a series of large tents which were so Vale in their inability to properly deal with the heat of thousands of bodies beneath them.

Cinder, contrary to the airs she put on, was not a city girl. She'd grown up along the fringes of civilization, a small village on the southern side of Mistral where food was largely grown by the hands of her neighbors and prepared by the hands of her family. As such, even when her life had led Cinder around the world and to the heart of several kingdoms, she had somehow avoided the strange world of city grocers. She'd been grocery shopping of course, but she generally only ventured into small venues when she hadn't had Emerald or Mercury just get the supplies for her.

As such, Cinder had been technically aware of the existence of massive food markets. Both indoor grocery stores, and outdoor farmers markets like she found herself being chaperoned through today. The kinds which spanned the entirety of a city block, and featured literally every kind of food one could possibly dream of, and several beyond the realm of imagination. But the difference between knowing of them, and actually experiencing the sheer quantity of food first hand was… Cinder struggled to find a word more appropriate than ‘terrifying’.

“Cinder. Cinder Fall. Remnant to Cinder” Emerald was trying and failing to get the normally unflappable woman's attention back towards the quest at hand. Even going to far as to snap her fingers in an attempt to attract a mediocram of focus. Unfortunately Cinder was turned so that her blind half was closer to Emerald.

If Cinder had been listening, she would have heard Emerald mumble “I know she's going to hate me for this” before stalking up to the distracted Cinder and yelling over the noise of the busy Bazar “Ash!” but she wasn't listening, too intensely focused on the nearby smoothie cart as she had been.

In response to her old, long retired name being so carelessly uttered in public, Cinder's gaze snapped to the green haired woman. Her one good eye now fully turned towards Emerald. The intensity of which would have once been enough to cause her to react as though she had been physically slapped, but these days Emerald just rolled her eyes and motioned for Cinder to follow before leaning down to the young, orange eyed child who held her hand to exchange a few words as they walked away.

Who even invited that little… I'd say ‘bastard’ but I think that's maybe just be an accurate label
in this case. Dammit. Cinder wallowed in silent defeat from trying to find some insult or name that wasn't completely juvenile to level at the young boy, while continuing to follow Emerald to the supposed cheese paradise they were here for in the first place.

The child in question was young, prepubescent to be sure, not even any missing teeth yet. Though Cinder really hadn't been listening when Emerald had been introducing him, she was fairly certain his name started with a ‘B’. He was maybe up to her bust, height-wise, and his black hair was just a hair shorter than her own, though far messier with its tips somehow a slightly different shade of black than the rest. Cinder could see traces of his mothers, in his cheekbones and chin she especially saw a younger Ruby.

Apparenty the rest of Vale weren't quite as intimately familiar as Cinder had been with the bone structure of Mrs Rose-Schnee though. Several people on the trip from the landing pad, where Emerald had met Cinder with the little snot-nose in tow, had commented that their child was ‘adorable’ or ‘so well mannered.’ Which at first left Cinder utterly confused, since she barely even registered his presence until the third or fourth motherly coo interrupted her otherwise brisk walking pace.

At least Emerald has the excuse of him latching onto her like some overgrown walking tumor. Aside from the eyes and hair, he doesn't even look anything like me!

It wasn't even that Cinder disliked children. She had once found them revolting, certainly. That was just in a more ‘never want to imagine them coming out of me’ kind of way. She was also, though she would never admit to it, afraid of having a small sentient being of her own to care for. She had seen some downright ambitious, ruthless, and terrifying people she had held respect for utterly change once they introduced a fledgling person into their lives.

Emerald was seemingly another hapless victim of this unfortunate occurrence, even though the child in question wasn't hers. Contrary to the trend, instead of becoming meek and sniveling like so many Cinder had known, she stood straighter when her charge was present. Her shoulders locked into place like she was preparing for an attack from any angle, her eyes scanned the area for incoming threats and inconveniences. Her plans were not reduced down to ‘grab the kid and run from danger’ like most parental guardians. Instead, she gave off an air not unlike a large maternal wolf; hard, ruthless, and prepared to be terrifying in defence of her living territory.

Cinder's parched mouth was much less of an issue than she remembered before. Not that she'd ever admit it.

---

Cinder wasn't too proud to say she was drooling a bit.

Her mouth had been beginning to water as her SUPR driver rounded the turn onto a massive driveway. Even before the home became visible over the rolling hills filled with what looked like grape vines, the anticipation had left Cinder's stomach close to growling. As the car grew closer, the aroma of cooking meat finally overtook the inoffensive pine air freshener, recent rain, and wood smoke which itself dominated the smell of ripening fruit and other late-autumn happenings.

“Woah, this driveway is massive. Think they have their own zip code?” the young man with dogwood-colored hair asked with an attempt at friendly humor.
Cinder was drawn out of her daydream involving a troupe of line dancing meat cuts by the question, and she was not happy about that fact. *Well. There goes your review score. Shame you were doing so well, but you just had to try and socialize didn't you?* Sometimes it was the little evils that made her day, and being petty was almost always fun when done purposefully.

True to her word, Cinder lowered the star rating as she exited his car, all the while giving a warm smile and pleasant but concise farewell.

She now found herself standing in front of a... *unique* home. Dark teal, with wine red shutters and frames, with a subdued and faded, almost tarnished, golden mural of climbing ivy stretched from around the far side corner and up to the second floor of windows. If Cinder had been more self conscious of her inability to care for plants, she might have been envious of the still-living ivy canopy shrouding the walkway from driveway to tastefully decorated wraparound porch. The door, contrasting the rest of the house but still somehow fitting, was pine green with a breathtaking spread of hand-painted pink lotus blossoms scattered across its width. A comically small yet detailed hammer acted as a decorative knocker, as if someone had been given leave to include *just one thing* and had decided that *one thing* would steal the show somehow.

True to form however, Jaune opened the door just before Cinder made it to the welcome mat. His smile beaming and his apron smudged with all sorts of delectable browns and greens. The smell from inside nearly caused Cinder to collapse in ecstasy.

Lucky for the glass dish in her hands, she managed to not fall on the ground in a quivering mess.

“Cinder! Right on time, c'mon in” Jaune motioned as he held the door open wider just a fraction to allow Cinder passage. “Sorry for any mess, but it should be pretty confined to the kitchen” Cinder didn't see a doily out of place as she was lead through what had to be the formal dining room. Even the rather eclectic trinkets which filled the decorative niche of the space were all polished to a shine and their displays dust free.

As they made a quick zig zag along the width of a hallway, Cinder could see even more odds and ends hung along the walls. Where most people might hang paintings or family albums, Jaune's home held everything from masks, to pen bouquets, and Cinder thought she could see a belt buckle or two. It was a downright odd way to decorate, but it was consistent enough that it was more like a stylistic choice than anything.

Just as she was about to ask about the decor, the two of them stepped into The Kitchen. Cinder could hear the capital letters in her mind, and they were *deserved*. All other kitchens were just trying to be this one, and they made a poor showing of their attempts. Even in-use Cinder could see where everything went and how organized the whole thing was once it was all cleaned and reset, not that it was much of a mess at the moment anyway. The only things noticeably out of place were a damp cleaning rag smudged with the same greens and browns on Jaune's apron, a cutting board with a chunk of meat resting patiently for its time, a meat fork in a set with a gorgeous pair of knives—chef's and carving—a scattering of seasonings and garnishes, and a fleet of serving platters and pots with covers to keep their contents hot.

With her jaw threatening to become a tripping hazard, Cinder finally came back from her Kitchen-induced stupor to find Jaune trying to get her attention “Cinder. Cinder Fall. Remnant to Cinder” he was on the verge of snapping his fingers before she shook the stars from her eyes and forced her focus onto him instead of the heavenly location around her. “Hey, welcome back to land of the living. You can put your dish on the buffet there” he motioned to the covered dishes “unless it needs to be warmed up?”

“It should still be fine” Cinder placed her meagre offering to this holy temple of food onto its
altar “it's an appetizer so I doubt it will be waiting long”

Jaune moved towards the cutting board as he covered with her “So, we're a bit out of the way here, how was the drive?” his focus was on the knives and meat, but his attention was clearly turned to Cinder.

“Definitely longer than most, my diver made decent time I suppose.” Cinder decided to sit at a nearby pony wall lined with stools. “What brought you all the way out here?”

“Nikki kept saying none of the wines we could get here tasted right. Not even the imported Mistrali ones” he gave a lightheaded chuckle “long story short, my partner bribed me with getting to design a house if I helped her buy the land. An Arc can’t be a homebody without a home, and our apartment at the time had a terrible landlord...” he trailed off as if the entire story told itself from there.

Cinder could relate to nothing tasting quite right in Vale. “Is... Nikki? from Mistral?” Jaune gave a nod of assent “What region?”

Jaune answered in a voice that said ‘I’d ask if you want the long or the short version of that particular story... ’ “Trust me. You don't know it.”

“What, afraid the two of us will be some long lost best friends who happen to reconnect purely by chance” Cinder joking questioned “Unless she's from the far south, and given she's—I assume —a huntress, I highly doubt she is.”

The far south of Mistral wasn't well enough connected to the infrastructure to even consider travel to the nearest combat school. Up near the inland sea was within reason for a promising warrior to be found and trained, but the farther south the lower that chance became. Cinder was fortunate enough to have not been forced into the ranks of a bandit clan or left to a life of chowder coordinator. Cinder was far from average for her region though.

Jaune sighed ‘nobody ever believes the short version...’ “She's probably better known for her tournament fights, but yeah, we're still actively licensed. To answer your question though, she's from the far north coast, huge port city, Logos.”

That didn't make any sense. The only large port city on the northern coast was Argus. There were port towns all over the place, but Jaune had been very specific about ‘huge’ and ‘city’.

Just before Cinder could question him further, the sound of a door opening and closing sounded. And drew both of their attention to a tall, red-headed woman carrying two bottles in her arms. As she turned, Cinder caught her emerald eyes and the two of them froze with looks of surprise on their faces.

‘Do you believe in destiny?’ was the first and only thought in Cinder's head, and it kept playing back like a skipping record. Always in the same voice, while staring at those same emerald eyes.

The silent reverence was broken by a single, almost shouted word. A name so rarely used the owner of it nearly forgot it was hers in the first place, only to be reminded of it recently, and then it never seemed to leave her alone.

“Ash!”

Cinder's mouth went dry.
to quote Yell Head "...Nani!"

:D been planning that drop since the party/bar scene's second visit. Promise I'll explain it later, but for first impressions, how was it?

If you've read this far and are a regular, I added some notation to early chapters to better specify the timeframe they occur in. I hope that clears up one of the big issues people have with the fic.

as always feedback-rights! no feedbackophobes allowed in my brain.
Weighting on Super(wo)man

Chapter Summary

Maybe we could start a band!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Weiss Rose-Schnee was heavy.

Not that Ruby would ever say that out loud, or even admit to thinking it if she valued certain regions of her body. Being used as a crutch was nothing new to her, or course, but that didn't mean that supporting the weight of another person whose center of balance was nowhere to be found was light work.

Sure, Weiss was considerably lighter without a mass of metal and plastic attached to her shin, but she also didn't lean on Ruby when it was there—at least usually. Ruby counted herself lucky it wasn't a full- or even half-leg prosthetic, and that she only had to support her wife a few steps to the couch this time. Instead of across the entire medical wing of a combat school wearing nothing but a medical gown and missing a liter of blood... like last time.

I wonder how many people get to say 'like last time' to a situation like that? There's got to be at least seven of us. Maybe we could start a band!

But, the needs of the hobbling spouse outweighed the needs of the imaginary musical group, at least until Weiss finally relieved Ruby of her burden and took her seat at end of the sofa. Weiss still looked incredible even wearing a pair of baggy lounge pants and a Signal-branded tee that was probably older than Ruby. Laying her foot and legs across said three seater, Ruby took a moment to take in the utter Weiss of the moment and admire the woman in question once more.

Her hair was down, which in itself was a rare treat not often seen outside of their morning routine, but retained a very special set of hairpins just to keep it out of her eyes. Her face was immaculate in that she only applied the basics of her normal makeup—foundation, a bit of blush, and some mascara; practically naked to the world compared to most days. Her arms were currently uncovered by sleeves, and showed a collection of old scars which on anyone else would be visible as paler skin, but for Weiss it were little more than patches of extra texture under just the right lighting at just the right angle. Her legs, despite being covered by the soft material were shapely and—Ruby knew from experience—easily capable of turning most small grimm into vapor on their own. Out of the leg of the pants stuck a pristine foot, whose toes were currently being flexed and clearly beckoning for a rub at Ruby's earliest convenience, and a connection hub for a prosthetic ankle and foot.

Weiss’ metal-capped stump wasn't hidden like it had been for months after she had received it—a concerted effort on at least three fronts made sure that particular habit didn't have the ground to take root. Much like Yang, she had spent a fair amount of time impossible to motivate. Unlike Yang, the original foot was amputated medically and on purpose. The damage done to it had rendered simple time and physical therapy a completely viable option if she had been ready to take it easy for a year for an almost full recovery. Weiss’ life was far from from over. But she opted—
with only input from Yang, much to Ruby's resentment at the time— to bring herself back up to fighting form much more swiftly with a prosthetic replacement.

“Take a seat or take a hike. You can get all doey-eyed at your house,” a coarse voice from behind her chided. It had a sound not entirely unlike Yang’s, but it’s owner lacked the same sense of compassion to temper her rougher edges. Ruby turned towards the source with a beaming smile on her face and maybe just a bit of vitriol in mind.

“Sure thing mom,” Ruby’s perfectly trained smile showed absolutely no sign of sarcasm or dishonesty, but still the raven haired woman reacted like she’d been physically attacked. “I’ve got to make a quick jump back over to the workshop, mind not kidnapping my wife while I’m gone?” before she could see the reaction to her words, Ruby spun one more and planted a kiss on Weiss’ head before making for the door.

The smile never left Ruby’s face.

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Eleven Months Ago:

“Dad, you can't be serious” to call Yang's mood ‘eruptive’ would put volcanoes to shame, “you know what she did last time. How can you possibly think letting—” Yang gesticulated angrily towards the closed door leading back to the den from the bedroom Taiyang, herself and Ruby had all shuffled into. “ — Her back into your life is a good idea?”

Taiyang, for his part, seemed to have expected this kind of reaction. Instead of getting defensive or any sort of combative, he let out a long sigh before answering “I don't think it's a good idea. Not in the slightest. I think Raven will absolutely take the first chance to fly away the minute —” Tai jammed his index finger into an open palm for emphasis, “— she thinks it's the best course of action to save her skin from anything even mildly inconvenient.”

“So why—” Yang's question was silenced by a hand being held up.

“Let me finish honey. Then you and I can go out to the yard and beat the sense into one another the easy way. But until then listen. Please” Taiyang's voice didn't raise as he interrupted his daughter, instead remaining calm and level. Not that it was surprising, in Ruby's experience her dad had only yelled twice.

He would shout — raise his volume to be heard over distances or noise —often during their childhood sure, but the three of them had lived in the woods. Shouting was just the default form of speaking over ‘short’ distances when surrounded my sound-absorbing trees. He would also shout encouragements and critiques during Sparring matches or other training exercises. But her dad had only ever yelled twice.

This situation wasn't anywhere near either of those two in terms of Taiyang being angry.

Ruby's father squared his shoulders, and took a shuddering breath as he recentered himself. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. But she's still family— and not just because we were married and had you—” He preempted an interjection from Yang, “family like you two and Blake and Weiss. Even if the four of you didn't have a ceremony, or your weddings bands, you know full well you would do nearly anything for eachother. For me, that includes watching out for Qrow's sister since he
can't anymore,” Tai paused. He showed signs of internal struggle as he did, like he was wrestling with an Ursa in his brain, “And your mom, Summer, she made me promise when we were still in school that I would take care of those two. Make sure they had a shoulder when she couldn't be there” he deflated a bit at having to pull the Summer card, but Ruby and Yang were respectful enough to let him have the time to recover. “So bad idea? Absolutely. But if you want me to turn my back on those promises…”

Ruby found the words she'd been searching for since her and Yang had entered their childhood home to find her father and Raven waiting for them. “We love you dad.” She closed the distance between them for a hug, pulling Yang in as she did. “But if you think for a second that we're going to let either of you live this one down, you clearly raised two different daughters.”

Yang sighed before joining the hug instead of just being roped into it. “Just for this, you better be ready to pay in the sparring ring.”

Taiyang Xiao Long gave a deep belly laugh “You better be ready yourself, little dragon.”

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Present Day:

The trip from the Xiao Long-Branwen cabin to the workshop was quick, just a short walk for most, towards a structure built far enough to prevent loss of anything remotely flammable or otherwise lacking in desire to possibly be destroyed by a misfire or explosion.

As she opened the door, a wave of heat washed over her. “Dad! You forgot to turn the exhaust fans on again,” Ruby shouted over the noise of said previously-still fans she had switched on as she entered.

The workshop had originally been a gift from Ruby (and the rest of her family) to her father. As he had continued to age, his ability to contribute to local Hunts had dwindled. He could still teach at Signal without issue, but he was clearly itching to do something beyond just run drills and train students. Ruby attributed her love of weapons and gadgets to Taiyang’s old tinkering shed, the birthplace of her own Crescent Rose and her sister's Ember Celica; even the ‘hospital’ for uncle Qrow's trusty Harbinger on occasion. Those memories had lead her to convincing him to step back from the direct grimm hunting, and instead become a recovery destination for Hunters and Hunter equipment alike.

The workshop had the facilities for a maximum of six to work on repairs and upgrades at the same time, regardless of what station or tool was required. During most weekends, it was a place for local students to brainstorm and learn from Quartermaster Taiyang himself the intricacies and subtleties of any and all Hunter tools which came through his domain. But for the moment it was empty save for Ruby herself, and Taiyang as he worked on Weiss’ foot.

Those who utilized the space all had access to a public collection of rocket-propelled lockers which were housed there, or even space for their own to be stored if they were visiting from far enough away. Ruby always kept a spare locker here, which she now approached. Emblazoned with the icon her and her mother shared, the locker had once belonged to Summer, but had long ago been repurposed by her daughter. She punched in her personal code, M-R-M-D-N, a shorthand for the old patchian word roughly translating to Gravekeeper. It didn't open to show another Crescent Rose, or extra ammo. Instead it held memories.
A silver sword with bright green accents hung from a nearly invisible metal wire. An old piece of a torn red sash. A panel of plate armor, white under all the scorch marks and wear. A pair of goggles, their yellow lenses cracked. Memories; sometimes the only remnants and sometimes just momentos gifted by their still living owners. Those, and a veritable bank of small, multicolor coins in neatly sorted and bound stacks weighed the locker down well beyond the safe limit for flight or delivery of its cargo.

With care, Ruby began to remove her day trip outfit. Her long sleeved blouse came over her head with a cacophony of jingling. Her pants gave a similar sound as they were pulled down. The small, multicolor coins which made up her form-fitting armor exposed. Slowly, she undid the clasps and bindings of the layer of protection granted by those she had known.

Ruby re-covered herself with a spare outfit her father kept in the building for her, close fitting and easy to work in, with the addition of a work apron grabbed from a nearby hook. The interconnected plates of metal were still mostly in fine shape as she laid them out across a nearby workbench. The upper body's cuirass and bracers were all in working order, but large swaths of protection were missing from the cape's undelayer and one of the thigh panels where she had taken hits on her last hunt. With practiced ease, Ruby began to find the damaged coins and disconnect them from the whole. Each one holding a symbol and a pair of dates. Each one a friend, or enemy, who had once again led her to where she was now. Alive, and fighting for the world they would never see.

After stacking and binding the marks into a bundle, she placed them into her locker before reaching into her belt pockets. She drew out several more memories, several more friends. It took time, but still she drilled holes into the disks and linked them to her everyday armor where they were united with more whose lives had touched hers, and continued to protect it. Luckily only a handful were required this time, but she was getting older. Getting slower. Ruby wondered if she would run out of enemies first, or memories. She was afraid of what either one would mean for her.

But, for the time it took for the new links to cool and set, Ruby Rose was not weighed down by those memories. Not physically anyway.

For the rest of today, Ruby Rose was unburdened, visiting her father, and running late for that foot rub she owed Weiss.

For the moment, Ruby Rose-Schnee was light.

Chapter End Notes

Awww, Ruby's an emotionally burdened bundle of snark. who could have seen that coming?

Not much to say about this chapter, I got to recall a bit of worldbuilding from.. 12 chapters ago? 9?
As always, thanks to Yell Head (and deTimber on this one a bit)

And please give me feedback. All of it. Otherwise, I wouldn't know to do stuff like add in a few timeline-assisting things back in the early chapters.
When the Ember meets the Burn

Chapter Summary

Cinder, we are not giving the eight-year-old coffee.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Emerald had issues with the man standing in front of her.

They had nothing to do with his rather space-consuming… Spine? Fin? Emerald figured it would be rude to ask. It was just that the man had, for one reason or another, stepped into the small, humid, poorly ventilated public rain shelter after failing to put any deodorant on this morning. Normally a bit of sweat smell didn’t bother her, she’d grown up largely on the streets after all, but the specific combination of sweaty bodies and moist scales reminded her of a certain establishment from her childhood which had a less than reputable practices in it’s back rooms.

So, while Emerald thanked the civic planners and architects of Vale for the benevolent addition of these bus stop-like locations around the city. She also silently cursed whatever numbskull decided to cut costs by never installing even a large fan into them. Instead they had Vacuan-inspired crossbreeze vents, which generally speaking didn't work too well in the humid climates. Fortunately, they did manage to keep the collective body heat from building to unsafe temperatures.

Small victories, Emerald. Small Victories. She thought, carefully keeping her breathing steady to prevent a large whiff of painful memories.

Had Emerald been alone, the smell would have been a minor, temporary inconvenience. Her semblance worked on practically all major senses but touch, and Emerald had used it to filter out everything from road work outside her apartment to keeping a broken air conditioning unit from hampering a date once. Even with her practice over the years sharing visions and sounds, the sense of smell was far trickier to fool. Unfortunately that meant she could only comfortably alter the smells for one target at a time, and only when she could actually concentrate.

The black-haired child standing just to Emerald's right as they waited showed no signs of olfactory discomfort, just the general fidgetiness that came from being an eight year old told to stand still for longer than sixty seconds. His rain poncho was an easy to spot, bright red among the usual blacks and greys of the adult world. His Yang-yellow boots were hand-me-downs from his older sister, and were covered in adorable flower prints.

Emerald occasionally found it entertaining that Brennan was a sharp inversion of the Schnee whites and blues despite his parentage. Wavy black hair and—despite the more obvious color combinations—orange eyes from some odd combination of gold and red. Dust Babies were always a roll of the dice when it came to inherited traits; even normally static hereditary semblances weren’t immune to the blender of Bonding Dust. Brennan definitely took after Blake in most of his obvious features, mostly his nose and hair, while lacking any Faunus attributes. He’d somehow even managed to avoid the Silver Eyes from Ruby, something Emerald wasn’t sure was possible
“Won't the schedule be delayed from all this rain?” a voice asked from somewhere towards the back of the structure. From the tone, she was probably a Beacon student trying to make it back before the end of some event.

"Hey, this ain't Mistral, the airship'll be here, just watch.” another voice answered. Almost definitely her partner, and a Vale city local judging by the accent and complete lack of concern in his voice.

The fairly mundane exchange nagged at Emerald until she checked her scroll just to make sure for herself. The airship still had about seven minutes before it could be considered late, and according to a quick look at the weather the rain was supposed to let up later in the day for a few hours. Maybe enough to invite Cinder to something, Emerald realized with excitement.

But before any plans could be made, a pleasant chiming sound like four soft, distinctly electronic bells played from the scrolls of everyone in range of the landing pad.

The Variable Incoming Brief Exclamation Sounds were a standardized set of tones used across all of Remnant's various air traffic systems—and loved by most of the population younger than thirteen for its acronym. The specific sounds were used to inform those in range just what kind of ship was inbound, what cargo it carried, and was just generally a warning to clear any nearby wide, flat areas. While it wasn't wholly necessary in cities with designated air traffic zones, it was incredibly useful in the wilderness and small villages as a kind of early warning system in case their only landing site also happened to be thier town square.

Those apparently waiting for the incoming passenger ship began shifting towards the front end of the shelter, while those with other plans began moving towards the rear to make room. Lucky for Emerald, her olfactory tormentor was among those not waiting for someone to disembark.

Brennan had apparently misheard the warning, or maybe just gotten caught up in the crowd as it shifted, and found his way to Emerald after a few seconds. Emerald would be lying if she claimed she hadn't begun panicking slightly before a small hand slipped into her own. It's owner gave a small, sheepish smile as Emerald's shoulders relaxed.

After the airship came into view, and eventually maneuvered flush with the off ramp, those near the front began to file towards it while opening umbrellas and turning up hoods against the rain. Emerald was no different, leading Brennan by the hand towards the crowd of passengers while covered by an umbrella, not bothering with the hood of her jacket.

Cinder was standing beneath a portable all-weather shelter rolled against the docked airship for… well, shelter. She was wearing what had quickly become her regular outfit during the ongoing wet season, bird talon boots and all. Emerald had grown to enjoy the imposing figure Cinder cut in her avian theme, though she made sure to subtly steer Cinder towards certain accessories and layers that fit the coat and boots far better than the ones the woman had picked initially. Now the leggings were thicker, off-gold with silver detailing, and a small silver choker shaped like a chain of feathers completed the look.

“Cinder!” Emerald waved her open umbrella as she spoke over the crowd of people. The woman in question looked up from her scroll at the sound of her name.

“Right on t—… You have a child attached to you,” Cinder said, confusion clear in her voice. “Emerald, why is there a child attached to you?”

The question took Emerald by surprise. I definitely told her I was bringing Brennan along, right? “Cinder, meet Brennan. Brennan, this is Ms. Fall”
The young boy gave a shyly mumbled “Hello Ms. Fall,” before escaping to hide behind Emerald.

“This one,” Emerald reached back to give Brennan an encouraging touch on his shoulder. “Is my godchild, and I definitely told you I was bringing him. His mom— Blake’s sick, and wanted to make sure he wasn’t bored in the house with Yang being… Yang,” Emerald punctuated the name with a slight shrug of her shoulders. She had mean to make a full arm motion, but the combination of umbrella and Brennan had hampered her ability.

“… Huh, I thought you just misspelled ‘banana’ and the autocorrect didn’t catch it,” Cinder responded like that was a perfectly reasonable assumption. “In any case, I'm in need of ingredients,” Cinder patted her pockets as she moved towards the edge of the protected area. She stopped suddenly and looked up at Emerald. “And also apparently forgot my umbrella back at the academy. Do you have a spare?”

Emerald did in fact have a spare. Brennan’s favorite, which Emerald had brought just in case. “Technically… ”

The child-size umbrella was so very pink.

The cartoon characters and rainbows didn't help much either. The little bobbing motions of a normal gait were interrupted as the umbrella's carrier navigated puddles and crowds, flitting back and forth or sometimes just hopping up quickly and falling back down just as suddenly. But Emerald's brainpower was a bit more focused towards another, much closer situation.

Cinder, as experience would predict, did not decide to utilize the cheery umbrella covered in cartoon princesses—and a particularly well-muscled scorpion woman in a cocktail dress—which had never belonged to anyone but Brennan, who was frolicking beneath it. Instead Cinder was walking alongside Emerald beneath the far less pink adult-sized umbrella as they moved from the air dock to the market Emerald had in mind. Cinder likely could have made the trip with just her coat, as could Emerald, but sometimes you just didn’t want to deal with water in your face or risk messing up your bangs. Personal space was a small price to pay for a bit of longer-term comfort. In Emerald's case, the price was personal space, and an inability to focus on anything but the heat radiating from the woman beside her.

Cinder was warm.

She always had been. Supernaturally so for a time, but even before her stint as a maiden Cinder's semblance had the side effect of causing her to be slightly warmer than most. Nothing compared to Yang’s ‘low heat’ days, but more like she had a consistent low fever. Emerald currently found the close proximity and extra heat quite distracting.

So distracting that Emerald and Cinder would occasionally miss the signal for a street Brennan had reached but not crossed without them. He was always waiting on the corner for them, and never fully left Emerald's field of vision. Occasionally a friendly stranger would be waiting alongside him, and a few even complimented his manners or ‘how well you two raised him,’ much to Emerald's amusement. Eventually Cinder caught on that Brennan wasn’t going to just disappear, and began interacting instead of outright ignoring him. Once the scary one-eyed hawk woman began to smile on occasion, the previous fear evaporated within minutes, even going so far as to ask to see her mechanical hand more closely.

Cinder certainly wasn’t warm towards Brennan, but the acknowledgement of his existence went a long way to bridging that gap.
Less than a block away from the market space just outside the SDC building, Emerald's eyes followed the red and pink strokes of Brennan as he wove through the crowd just ahead of her, but she couldn't move her attention from the presence just a half step to her left. Subconsciously matching her steps in mirror to Cinder's, ostensibly to prevent the woman from hitting her head on the arms of the umbrella Emerald held.

The occasional light brush of Cinder's feathery decoration on her hand didn't send shocks up Emerald's arm, but it certainly recentered all available senses towards the woman. So much so that she barely noticed the thinning of the already sparse foot traffic, and the sudden lack of very specific colors in her field of view. Once the information made its way through the Cinder-induced haze in her mind however, Emerald jerked to a stop.

*Where? Who? When? Back trace, Emerald. Memory. Last time I saw him was...* As she turned on her heel, Cinder let out a noise of surprise at the sudden lack of protection from the rain. Emerald didn't even glance in her direction.

Luckily, she saw Brennan standing on the other side of a street they had just passed. The cross signal had expired and cars now ruled the road, but he was there, safe and in her sights. Emerald briefly considered using her semblance to turn the lights red, but abandoned it as soon as she confirmed he wasn't actively being mugged or threatened in any way.

Cinder edged her way back beneath the umbrella. “What was th—” her question was cut off by a quick, withering glare. A look that promised immediate retribution to the next thing to come between Emerald and the child she was supposed to be watching. She then turned her gaze back across the street to wait for the signal to change.

As soon as the symbol changed from its red hand, Brennan began to calmly cross like it was any other day. The stress Emerald was feeling lightened with each step closer they came. She didn't let her face show just how relieved she was when he stepped up next to her with a bright smile.

“Emmy, look!” he said with energy befitting of his hyperactive mother's youth. Brennan held out a feather, somehow dry despite the rain. It was a fairly standard black feather, maybe a raven's, but his joy was still infectious enough to bring a smile to Emerald's face. “I thought it looked like Ms. Fall's!”

‘Ms. Fall’ rolled her eyes at the claim, but Emerald laughed out loud. “Ha! I guess it does a bit,” she agreed. “Do you like her feathers?”

“Mhm!” the boy nodded his assent vigorously.

Crouching down, Emerald handed the umbrella off to Cinder. She took the feather from Brennan before fixing it to her own hair with the help of a pin. “I like her feathers too,” Emerald said with a smile. “I like them so much that I'll teach you how to make some just like hers,” she bopped him on the nose for emphasis. “But first we've got to pick some things up, and the market is going to be really crowded. I need to find Argyle's, think you can help me not get lost in there with your super eyes?”

Brennan nodded and held out his hand in response, which Emerald took before standing up. They shared a smile before continuing the walk through the rain, leaving Cinder alone with an umbrella and dumbfounded look.

The market itself was set up in a courtyard adjacent to the SDC Vale headquarters—a small step in the grand plan of getting people to utilize the grand mall within as a regular shopping center. It
was covered by large tents at the moment, a must have investment for any outdoor, rainy-season event in Vale. There was no one entrance, though the stalls were all neatly arranged in isles and rows via a number lottery; no booth was in the same place twice except by chance, save the navigation kiosks which held updated maps and even robotic ‘carts’ who could carry your bags and navigate the maze should you need one, offered free of charge to the public. The entire thing technically was held at a loss, if you only counted the money spent on services provided against the money gained directly from the very slight tax on every purchase. The Market paid for itself through more indirect means; goodwill and saturation marketing primarily.

It also made for a perfect public introduction to any number of products and services freshly graduated from the staff lounge floors of the monolithic building behind it.

Emerald turned to Cinder after reaching the edge of the tents, in a small alcove between isles left open for security personnel to have an easier time navigating the crowded spaces. A small screen attached to the wall acted as a map. “Your brie is going to be inside, Cinder. But our feather supplies are going to be scattered around out here. Did you need anything but the cheese?”

“Only if there's somewhere to get fresh southern Mistrali mountain berries. Not that I'd expec—”

“H36-37, should be able to make a stop no problem,” Emerald interrupted after a few quick taps on the screen. “How about you Bren? Need anything else while we’re here?”

“Mmmm… popsicles!” He answered with a small hop as the idea came to him.

“Popsicles? In this weather? Your moms would kill me”

“Emerald's right, Popsicles are terrible in the rain. We should get coffee ,” Cinder escalated with a grin.

Emerald’s expression was not one of amusement. “Cinder, we are not giving the eight-year-old coffee . Unless you want to be the one in charge of him afterwards.”

But Brennan was already tapping at the navigation screen, trying to find… C-F-V-Y. “No coffee,” Brennan stated completely matter of factly. Emerald could help but start laughing at his clear disappointment at the fact.

“Darn,” Emerald pouted as sarcastically as she could, making a show of snapping her fingers and theatrically stomping her foot. “Oh well, let's get moving. I'm sure we can find something warm and tasty as we go,” Emerald ushered both of the complete children in her care towards the public pathways.

The trip through the rows of shops and stalls was quick, aided by Emerald’s status as head of security— and slowed by it on occasion when staff members stopped them to say hello or make an informal request. The first two stops were simple, a can of Valish waterproofing agent and a cone of fresh roasted nuts.

After backtracking and finding Cinder standing in the middle of an intersection staring in the direction of a smoothie stall, Emerald nearly facepalmed.

She was thirsty? It's not like we can't get something to drink. But really, she couldn't keep her
eye on him for five minutes? “Cinder. Cinder Fall. Remnant to Cinder” Emerald snapped her fingers in an attempt to garner attention, but she was apparently also deaf from her missing eye, as well as blind.

“I know she's going to hate me for this…” Emerald grumbled to no one in particular. But at the moment, I'm kind of okay with that.

Emerald was having issues with the woman in front of her.

“Ash!”

Chapter End Notes

Yell Head doing work as always. got me to add another 900 words or so with only a handful of basic human rights being revoked.

Brennen was surprisingly hard to write for this. I had one idea for him in my head, but it wasn't working (hence the delay). Side note, his name means "Burn" in German, which I thought was too perfect to pass up on a day spent with Cinder.

As always, Feedback is greatly appreciated.
"Do you believe in destiny?"

Ironic words to remember so clearly, given how long ago Cinder had last seen the person they belonged to. Over two decades since they had fought tooth and nail atop a shattered Beacon Tower as lives burned out like birthday candles below to the hurricane of carnage and Grimm which defined The Fall. A prodigy of a fighter taking on the closest thing to a god anyone outside if certain circles had seen for at least a hundred years. Twenty-some odd years since Cinder had pierced the red-haired Pyrrha Nikos, The Invincible Girl—a somewhat ironic Title—though the heart and reduced her to embers in the breeze.

A lifetime since Cinder had been a singular whole. Since her flesh had been melted away by magic. A magic whose only purpose was to burn away the Grimm, and, somewhat ironically given the near-death experiences it had enacted upon Cinder, protect life.

"Do you think she's okay?" were the first words Cinder registered through her mental haze. They belonged to a certain pink-haired monsoon of a woman, and were somehow said with both honest empathy, and a poorly concealed desire to stuff Cinder through a doughnut conveyor before lightly dusting her with cinnamon sugar and inject her with strawberry cream.

Cinder was horrified that anyone could communicate that with just a tone of voice.

That horror helped to bring Cinder back to reality though. Well, horror and the known but unfamiliarily strong feeling of her aura repairing… something, rather adamantly. Cinder recognized first that she was resting on a comfortable couch, her feet no longer covered by her boots and propped up using throw pillows. Next, she registered four people in various states of worry in the room, though she could only remember two of their names.

Jaune was easy, still wearing his apron and standing over Cinder with glowing hands—that explains my aura feeling like it's on drugs I guess. Then there was the pair she didn't know by name, their oddly-not-clashing green and pink color schemes not going at all with the home decor, but reminiscent of the doorway to the home. Finally, there was the woman of the hour, Pyrrha Nikos.

Cinder's memory of the girl on the tower was mostly primal, but she did recall a golden circlet and bronze armor, as well as a bright red ponytail and piercing emerald eyes. This grown version of that girl kept many of the same ideals in her appearance, but not quite the same. Her eyes remained vivid green and her hair red—worn in a utilitarian, but beautiful braid over her shoulder—but the rest of the classical Mistrali elements were altered. Her brow supported a crown of laurels, still bronzed. She wore no arms or armor, but the flowing off-white tunic and sandals reminded Cinder of museums all the same. Her tunic's shoulder was clasped by a dark, four-faceted gem with
beautifully preserved natural red feathers.

"Oh! She's awake, you can probably stop now," Pyrrha punctuated the suggestion with a few light slaps to Jaune's shoulder, prompting him to lower his hands and step back. "Hello again! You kind of… fell over when we met, are you feeling okay?" Pyrrha's green eyes stared into Cinder's own amber with concern—somehow not glaring with hatred—and found Cinder silent from confusion more than anything.

Cinder had seen quite a bit in her life, but resurrection was a thing of fairy tales even by her non-standard standards. Cinder had a rather short list of mind-tricking semblances strong enough to even come close to this level of realism, but Emerald couldn't manage touch and Neo had always fiddled with the small details too much. The Pyrrha Nikos in front of Cinder was physically touching her forehead, and so far hadn't changed outfit or eye color that Cinder could tell.

"I-… Who?" the question slipped out as Cinder tried to muddle through the situation as best she could. Her mind was working at full speed, but couldn't truly focus on anything except the bowl of grapes currently resting on a coffee table nearby. The grapes weren't particularly interesting, simple purplish-red orbs on a vine, they were just something that could be understood in the moment and weren't raised from the dead. Easy to comprehend, non-necromantic grapes.

"I'm…" the somehow-Pyrrha began hesitantly. "Well I guess you know my name is Pyrrha Nikos, but I'm not Pyrrha," not-Pyrrha placed emphasis on the name, and her hands into her lap as she sat on the coffee table. "I'm Nikki, which may not make much sense I suppose, but please understand that distinction is very important."

Cinder tried to move her attention from the bowl of grapes to something—anything—else, but her mind was running in circles. … Destiny. Not Pyrrha. Brisket. Jaune. Monsoon. Singing. Drinking. Thirsty. Fluids. Moist. Grapes... Over and over again the chain repeated. It could be stretched and defied but would quickly resume, making actual thought impossible. In a poorly planned attempt to break her loop. Cinder almost snapped the next step in her mental album out loud "Thirsty."

"Oh! Right, of course. I'll… go get you some water then. Wait right there." 'Nikki' swiftly rose to her full height, squared her shoulders, and performed the most confident nervous tittering Cinder had ever seen out of the room.

Finally not staring at the either the grapes or 'Nikki' Cinder's thoughts began organizing themselves into a shade of coherence. Enough, at least, to turn her eye to Jaune standing just on the other side of the room, nearby the pair currently sharing the love seat. As he began to sit, the woman with pink hair almost vibrated with… excitement? Maybe restraint?

"Sorry, for all this. I… it's been a while since anyone who knew Pyrrha met Nikki, and we all sort of… Forgot," Jaune was wringing his hands as he apologized.

"And… who, or what is… Nikki then?"

Jaune motioned towards the man in deep green southern Mistrali garb, "Ren can probably tell it better than me. I know the story first hand, but I'm not so great at the actual explaining part."

Cinder moved her gaze over to the man in question, his presence only really standing out now that attention had been drawn to him. She saw now that the overly still woman next to him was actually being kept in check by his calm demeanor.

Ren gave a small bow of his head, "Lie Ren, the name the world calls me matches the name of
my birth," a formal Mistrali greeting delivered in perfect southern Animan. In short it was a request to share names, specifically the name of one's family. The wording sounded normal enough for those not familiar, but the specific conjugation identified the greeting as a temporary truce between those who didn't know if they could trust the other. Classically, the ability to locate an enemy's family had been a kind of collateral, though the modern usage had done away with that implication. The rest of the room didn't seem to quite know what it meant.

Cinder replied in kind, her own Animan a bit more… rustic. Low-born to use the proper term. "Vermillion Ash, the world names me as Cinder Fall," ending with the best head bow she could perform after sitting up.

Seemingly placated by the reply, Ren relaxed a bit. "Nora." With that one word, the woman beside him—Nora—visibly relaxed as well. Her eyes no longer contemplated pastry-based lonely funerals for Cinder, and her energy almost appeared to visibly discharge from her previously flexing muscles.

Classical implication fully intended then.

Ren took a deep breath, his relaxation diminishing as he prepared to speak. "Pyrrha—Our Pyrrha Nikos—is dead. By your hand, on top of Beacon Tower," the room didn't so much tense as it did crackle. "You have been largely forgotten by the world, your actions barely footnotes in the history books. We know your actions, Cinder. She was our friend, but I won't make threats about making you wish for death. For memory of her, and by request of Pyrrha Nikos, you have been forgiven for what you did. Don't think for a second we've forgotten .

"Nikki is Pyrrha Nikos, just not the Pyrrha Nikos who you murdered." Well, that's good to have cleared up at least. "How much did you learn about the Relics? You held one for a time, and were central to Salem's plans, but how much did she tell you?"

Cinder knew quite a bit about the Relics, in fact. She knew they were incredibly powerful, and each one specialized in a separate Original Gift element. Each had a form of guardian tied to it, and when brought together they would unleash untold powe—

"Prfft!" Nora interrupted Cinder's rundown with a poor attempt at hiding a laugh. "So not really anything! Good to know Salem was consistent about keeping people in the dark too."

"I'm confused." Cinder was confused.

Attempting to summarize years of research apparently took far longer than a quick elevator pitch. According to Salem, and even Cinder's own investigations into the Relics, the conjoined power of all four being brought together would be nothing less than catastrophic. Cinder knew that the last time the they had all been together, two beings which she had initially thought of as merely guardians—she had only learned during the prolonged event in question that they were, in fact, the Brother Gods—appeared for the sake of stopping the user, Ruby in that case, from gaining power beyond that of the existing deities.

Now it was Jaune's turn to burst into laughter, even Nikki joined in with a chuckle having returned partway through Cinder's nearly hour-long retelling of the rather boring process of piecing together of legends and forgotten histories from around the kingdoms. "Oh man, and I thought Oz kept stuff from us," Jaune seemed to realize the sentence he had just said. "Okay, yeah, he kept that from us too. Guess those two were more alike than any of us want to admit."

"Have you met Ruby?" Nora interjected while practically rolling atop Ren in her laughter.
"She's probably the last person to want 'power greater than the gods', or did you miss the 'Go lick a nevermore.' speech?" Jaune again, now nearly doubled over in laughter.

Cinder's face burned with an embarrassed blush, "And how do any of you know I'm wrong?" she motioned her arms wide, referencing all present. "You could have gone digging, same as me, but definitely not until after all four had been brought together. You even said yourself that Ozpin hid the information from you."

The answer came from Ren, who had been laughing but not nearly as raciously. "We asked—or more specifically, team RWBY asked—the Relic of Knowledge what Ozpin had been hiding…"

The story which followed shattered much of what remained of Cinder's world, told over a well prepared meal kept warm during Cinder's… mental absence. The lives of Salem and Ozma leading to the death of an entire species of ultra-magical humans. The Brother Gods and their charging of Ozma with the unification of the world. All the way up to the relics being yet more fractions of their own power.

"—and then you killed Professor Ozpin, who popped into Oscar, but you should know that already, and the rest you were pretty much there for," Nora finished off the retelling rather nonchalantly before stuffing a massive bite of Mistrali bread-cake into her seemingly infinite maw.

It had taken the better part of another hour, mostly being interrupted by mouthfuls of wondrous food. Everything from sweet potato casserole, and of course the brisket, to Cinder's own baked brie and wild berries as a not-quite dessert. The meal was amazing and the story told across it equally awesome.

"Alright, so now that you've all thoroughly discounted my expertise on magical history and the Relics, what do they have to do with Nikki being not?" Cinder put as much inflection into the final word as she could without saying the name 'Pyrrha.' "I understand the Relic of Choice could do something like reverse a choice made, but then you'd probably all be dead in her place. And Creation can't recreate, which I know firsthand."

Ren nodded in confirmation. "That's where the trick comes in. Using Jinn's final question, we found out that the Relics can be used in various combinations, and those each contained their own unique number of uses from the individual Relic's." Ren began holding up fingers as he listed, "Creation and Destruction together can create a single new species or race. Choice and Destruction can essentially cure any physical ailment. Creation and Knowledge can bring boundless inspiration up to five times—"

"—And Creation, Destruction, and Choice used together, allows for a single, special kind of Wish." Nikki jumped to the end of the list, interrupting Ren. "Without reverberating consequences, those three in unison allows for one change to be made to a past event and it's concurrent result to be seamlessly spliced into the world. But the relics cannot change the events of an era already passed," Nikki's face fell as she continued. "I am that result."

Cinder was astonished. The 'good guys' had used a nearly limitless, complication-free alteration of the past selfishly? "... So you had the complete ability to, what? Rewrite almost any major disaster in the last century?"

Suddenly, some of the details of the past nine months clicked into place for Cinder; she was allowed into these people's lives out of guilt — "Prevent the Fall of Beacon?"

They didn't actually want Cinder around. She was just some trophy to say 'Look! Look what good people we are' and distract the world from knowing just what a travesty they had allowed to
happen—"And you used it to bring your friend back to life?"

The sheer absurdity of this entire night was catching up to Cinder. These people had invited her, a known murderer, into their home to share a meal. "That's... impressively selfish. My inner demons applaud you all," Cinder playfully clapped her hands as she accused. She really was impressed they had all that power, and didn't even think beyond 'I wish my friend had lived.'

Nothing could convince Cinder that this was all some stupid charade to make themselves feel good.

"I wished I had died." Jaune said, with the kind of calm certainty that only came from absolute understanding of what those words meant.

Oh. Well, now Cinder just felt like an asshole.

The rest of the table was disturbingly still and silent. "That I had been the one to fight on Beacon tower. That Jaune Arc had been the one to die, instead of Pyrrha Nikos. 'I only learned after Nikki showed up, that didn't mean I would be the Jaune Arc to die.'"

Cinder didn't know what to say to that. The old, young Cinder probably would have scoffed and continued to belittle him for his shortsightedness, and not accepted such a simple answer to the question of why. The Cinder who had lived through two decades of aimless existence understood that wish, but had never been so weak as to actually consider the option.

Cinder's eyes drifted over to Pyrrha Nikos, who's face held the same solid emptiness as Jaune's, and wondered what her side of the story was. If for no other reason than to feign a semblance of empathy, Cinder wanted to change the subject and never think of her recent lack of tact again. It was unlikely that she could get the full story from anyone else, and so far Nikki had been reminding Cinder of some cross between Emerald and Ruby. Maybe a simple question would get Cinder the distraction, and answers, she wanted.

As Emerald had said earlier in the day: 'You never get the answer to a question you don't ask.'

Chapter End Notes

So that's the quick rundown of what happened, there's going to be a bit more explanation but I wanted to give it it's own chapter.

Yell Head/WhatOtherPlanet, as always, was a huge help. deTimber also deserves a shout-out for helping me with a few areas.

Coming up very soon, you may notice the chapter numbers change since I'll be rewriting and combining the first six at least to add some exposition, explanation, and overall details and quality I didn't have back then. Those hopefully won't take as long as brand new chapters, but there will almost definitely be additional information added to them.

As always, feedback is appreciated.
Dependency

Chapter Summary

"...Any tool, with enough style, isn't Boring. Any weapon with enough familiarity isn't Impractical. Any weapon can be amazing, it just needs a little help..."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dependency:

Ruby Rose was in a good mood today.

It was a mood that not even Monday could dampen. Her trip to Patch had done wonders for her mood and mental wellbeing. Even still, her mood wasn’t fully related to that, or even because her birthday was coming up (though both of those things did help.) No, her spirits were lifted by the simple fact that it was finally time to start these students down the path towards true understanding of what a weapon could really do in the right hands.

It was time for Midterms.

Ruby Rose, of the Bloodstained Snow, The Crimson Death, The Red Queen, The Harvest, The Witchhunter, The Bloodied Sentinel, Centurion of Cherry, Petal Wake, Red Lightning, Queen of Slaughter, Macabre Artist, Gilded Guardian as well as countless other titles earned over the years, was bouncing with excitement. She even ‘forgot’ to put on some of her more extraneous armor panels this morning, and the ease and speed with which the slightly less weighted Ruby had darted and bounded around the classroom apparently bordered on terrifying if Cinder’s face was anything to go by. She had even, strangely enough, had made a comment before class about how cheerful Ruby was acting, and Cinder didn’t talk much before the third cup of coffee. Luckily, said third cup was downed by the time everyone showed up.

‘Everyone’ in this case being her lovely crew of midterm assistants currently milling about the classroom before the first bell. It was almost a tradition for Ruby to call up her various friends or enlist her family members, in response to the student’s comments from the beginning-of-semester Boring vs. Impractical ‘test.’ Ren, Nora, Weiss, and Cinder with Penny and Velvet standing in for the currently indisposed Yang and Blake, all assisted in the setup of the classroom’s temporary arena. For some reason, today was just full of weird little signals from all of them though. Not all the weirdness was bad necessarily, just… weird.

Weiss was the good kind of strange. She had been all sorts of excited this morning actually, so much so that she was awake to help Ruby with her normally pre-Weiss chores. Apparently, she enjoyed the coming midterm beatdowns just as much as Ruby did.

Speaking of the good doctor, Penny was... well she was always odd, unpredictable even. Even more so whenever Ruby mixed facts about the younger Penny from her childhood, with the respectable android doctor who stood before her now. The Penny she’d once known was long gone,
and even with Atlas' best technology the dead stayed dead. The overall Penny of the woman had remained, but even back upon their first meeting Penelope was colder, more analytical. Long gone were the friendly ‘Sal-u-tations!’ and almost sarcastic salutes, replaced instead by a much more strict and measured speech. Deep down a lot of the old Penny still resided, she still loved hugs and was intensely loyal to her friends, but the self-doubt about her humanity had slipped away somehow.

Velvet had been a stroke of luck: Mercury had enlisted the out-of-practice Emerald to handle his own class’s midterm without Yang, and CVFY was in town for lipstick of all things.

Ren and Nora, so inseparable they should just use a single name together—maybe NoRen... or Va-Lie-kyrie! Yeah, that’s good, Valiekyrie—had entered Ruby’s classroom all but fused together at the hips. Where normally Nora would be a poorly-insulated bundle of energy though, she seemed extremely contained, constrained even—also her hair was bright neon pink, oddly. Ren wasn’t any more quiet than usual but that would be hard to pull off, even for him. Instead he spent most of the time before the students arrived watching Cinder with his mood somewhere between apologetic and wary.

Despite the oddness, Cinder’s pre-class duties did include being available to answer questions and give advice to the students, and she fulfilled those duties with a disturbingly gracious smile. The students joined Ren in the wary glances towards the normally glaring woman.

Today being the beginning of Midterms, several students oozed nerves and test anxiety. Some had been preparing for close to a month for the various tests, trials, labs, and presentations required by each class. Weapons and Combat Integration was one of the few regarded as a stress-release midterm by the students due to it's supposed lack of a standardised subject matter. Not that Ruby couldn't create a 'real' test if she wanted, but she preferred a more freeform style of teaching. Plus, grading written tests sucked.

As her first period took their seats, Ruby's fine assortment of volunteers began casually forming up just behind her desk, some standing straight-backed while others leaned against the wall, or each other in the case of Ren and Nora. Everyone but Cinder had been through this at least once before, but Ruby had made sure she knew what was planned. It was also the first time Velvet was participating directly, but she knew what to do from observing the rare occasions her teammates had.

Not wasting any more time, Ruby jumped right in. "Morning kiddos! I bet you've all heard from faculty and alumni that my class has a fun, easy midterm, right?" Ruby leaned back on her desk as she addressed the room. "No long written portions or multiple choice bubble filling. No recommended chapters to read, or notes to review. Just watching some fights and maybe playing with the dust mixer's settings a bit," her nonchalant tone was honest, but only by technicality.

"Well I can't say that's entirely untrue, but don't think that means I don't have anything for you all to do," Ruby smiled as she pushed herself off her desk and moved to the center of the amphitheater. "So far, we've gone over the theory of Integration. With a small amount of low-level practical application where an addition to your weapon might require practice to prevent injury," Ruby's shark-tooth grin began to peak from her otherwise calm features. "Theory is now almost entirely behind us. Of course, Turning your back on an opponent can leave you wide open. So today, prepare for the past to come back to bite you." Some of the quicker students started to realize just what was about to happen, and that level of comprehension was exactly what Ruby was really testing for.

"Thanks to your first assignment, I called up some old friends—" Ruby pointed a thumb back
towards the assembled powerhouse. "—that you sorted... incorrectly. So now, with their help, you're all about to learn that any tool, with enough style, isn't Boring. Any weapon with enough familiarity isn't Impractical. Any weapon can be amazing, it just needs a little help," Ruby rubbed her hands together in excitement.

"Do I have any willing to volunteer for a quick spar against one if my lovely assistants?" Ruby asked with a sickeningly sweet smile. It wasn't broadcast, but any who stepped forward willingly were given glowing marks.

"No? No one wants to stand by their claim that Ashen Fate are, your words, 'Unimaginative dirty glass constructs'?" Cinder's muscles tensed a bit. Despite knowing about the comment from grading that specific student's answers earlier in the year.

"How about Myrtenaster being 'an over-engineered deathtrap with far too many functions for combat effectiveness'?" Weiss had been through this before, but Ruby could see her fingers twitching in patterns relating to her rapier's mechanisms.

Ruby read a few more out loud, and with each criticism, the students got more uncomfortable. Her team, however, only remained completely professional. Even if they all shifted in mildly threatening ways.

Finally, Ruby found the one she was building towards. "Ohh, very few people risk this one: 'Macabre Marionette can't possibly be an effective weapon with the danger posed by those wires to its wielder.' I think you'll go first for that one Princeton."

Ruby could hear the sweat pouring down the poor boy's face from here. Sure, it may have been a bit mean to call him out like that. If there was one weapon among this lot you didn't question, it was the one whose predecessor had kicked off the Fall of Beacon by killing its wielder. Not much had changed between Penny's Dance Macabre and Penelope's current Macabre Marionette, but there were now safeties in place. Ensuring no repeats of the grisly end of Penny Polendina.

Still, he approached the front of the classroom with an impressive amount of confidence. No doubt Princeton figured the easiest way past the obstacle of midterms was to prove his own point right and move on with his day. His demeanor through class had been one of least resistance, certainly. His twin sai were about as simple as weapons got, with each one held a small dust crystal on the pommel as their most complex element.

Penelope Polendina, inversely, had never been one for the easy road. Being a machine as complex as any squishy-guts person also helped paint an almost laughable contrast between the two combatants as they readied up.

"Since this is round one, I'll go over the basics with you all now. If you miss anything, my team is here to help." Ruby explained as she moved her desk as far back against the wall as it would go with the help of Nora. "First: Classic duel rules, fifteen aura points remaining or forfeit decides the match," she continued, turning back towards her class.

"Second: each and every member of team Privateers—the lack of a T is a stretch I'll admit, but I'm not changing it unless one of you makes me—can absolutely yeet any of you," Ruby held to let the word she had just ejaculated really hit home. The butchering was intentional, but she honestly wasn't entirely sure how the word was supposed to be used in the first place. A grin split her face as the students finally realized just what she had said. "We'll all be fighting with handicaps, but you're gonna have to figure out what they are on your own," Ruby teased in a sing-song voice.

"And finally third: this whole thing is because I want to see cool fights! Try your best: you pass
the test!" Ruby twirled a bit before hopping into Weiss' lap atop the recently moved desk. "Have fun!"

Penelope Polendina and Princeton Pat. Two titans featuring fearsomely awesome alliteration, stared silently. According to Yang and Mercury, Princeton was rarely the one to make an opening move. He was, unfortunately, not gifted with the stillness that came with servos and motors. Plus, Penny's grade wasn't on the line.

Princeton moved first then, understandably. A quick, testing strike with his offhand. His form was tight, and his footwork was controlled if a bit lacking in creativity.

Penny, limiting herself to only two blades for the sake of fairness, deflected the probing attack with calculated precision. Not so much as a millimeter of movement was wasted as she immediately ducked beneath Princeton's now extended arm with a spin, hooking her own arm into the crook of his elbow as she went.

To his credit, Princeton didn't give ground so easily. Opting to rotate—twirl was the wrong word for how he handled his weapons—his main hand sai so that the ice Dust on its hilt extended away from his arm. Using the momentum gained from Penny's grapple, he swung his whole body around the fulcrum of his elbow and jabbed at what normally would be the location of a person's kidney Dust-first. A small chunk of ice formed on the right side of her abdomen.

Being made of metal had certain advantages, like not having to worry about a punch to the kidneys. Taking the hit without so much as a grimace, Penny's aura absorbed the impact and was reduced on the scoreboard appropriately. In return she swept at Princeton's leg, forcing him to either hastily reposition or find out just how hard Penny's alloys were.

Like someone who paid attention in Yang's classes, he chose to break away entirely instead of trying to remain balanced by using his opponent as a point of contact.

Unfortunately, he had failed to account for exactly the aspect of the weapon he had criticized and found his left arm wrapped in nearly-invisible metal wire now taut from the newly created distance.

Evidently, Princeton didn't find the prospect of losing a hand to the 'design flaw' he'd criticised very appealing. "I forfeit!" he blurted out in panic.

As the wire became completely slack and unwound itself from his elbow, Princeton fell back and checked to ensure no harm had pierced his aura. It was still measured as full, and should have been completely capable of withstanding a single garrote to the arm for several minutes if need be.

Maybe a phobia . Ruby made sure that information was in his faculty notes in case another similar situation arose in another class.

"Awww… I really wanted to see Penelope break out her semblance, you guys would love it!" Ruby beamed excitedly. "Any questions from the peanut gallery about what just happened? No? Oh well, time for the next round then. Any volunteers?"

Ruby wasn't sure if the crickets in she heard were imaginary, or Penelope was just practicing for a recital.

"Still no takers? Fine," Ruby said with some sarcastic disappointment as she reached around Weiss to find the stack of soon-to-be victims. "Uhhh, Ren, you pick!" Holding out a fan of papers face-down, Ruby closed her eyes and hoped he chose one of the fun pairings.
Today was not a day of fair fights. At least not in Ruby's classroom.

As Carnelian took his seat, and Cinder strode gracefully back to her desk, Ruby looked between the final two matchups for the period in her hands. Weiss, resting her chin on Ruby's left shoulder—her right taken up by Nora just wanting to feel included—was 'assisting' Ruby's decision making.

Ruby didn't feel particularly assisted, but Weiss smelled nice today so she let it slide.

"That's hardly a fair match up, even ignoring the skill difference," Weiss said, her attention on Fusson Ona Dorned's sheet. He had made the unfortunate mistake of underestimating Crescent Rose, and had yet to pay dearly for it. But Ruby was trying her best to be fair about her selection process, mostly using her supposedly-neutral assistants to choose from a shuffled pile. Somewhat fortunately for Fuzz, Ruby decided he was less interesting than the other dueling pair. Making the choice known, the combatants rose and made their way into the ring. Her daughter against one of the most widely proficient fighters of a generation, Velvet Scarlatina.

Much like Weiss, Velvet's semblance was one that just hadn't really needed to push its original boundaries to be amazing. Instead, she'd put all of her focus into being able to replicate and modify all the fighting styles she knew without the implicit use of her—normally passive—semblance of copying fighting styles seamlessly. In short, Velvet Scarlatina was a true-blue Weapon Master. Normally 'unarmed' she was adept at grapples and hand-to-hand, but add in her ability to pick up any combination of weapons or weaponizable items, and Velvet quickly became a veritable storm of death and pain. It was for this reason, even assuming equal skill and experience, that Jei's match up against her would still be incredibly lopsided.

Jei, to her credit, had access to quite the personal armory. Slaying Grimm using Schnee-summoned pieces of other Grimm would have been amazing enough on its own, but no child of Ruby's was going to go Hunting with such makeshift weaponry as a skull-plate shield and a large tooth for a dagger. Across several months, Ruby had crafted a set of hilts, handles, and settings to enable her little girl to summon nearly any of her grisly trophies and swiftly weaponize it. Despite her access to nearly any weapon imaginable, Jei still preferred her more rugged—and decidedly un-Ruby'd—Tooth and Nail; a literal King Taijiitu fang partnered with a cestus-like hoof, sharpened to a cutting edge.

Even if Velvet hadn't been using her camera for this bout, the ability to simply steal one of Jei's own weapons and turn it against her was a massive hurdle. Unfortunately for Jei, this was a weapons class primarily. A well-equipped Scarlatina was a terrifying Scarlatina. Fairness had gone out the window when Jei's test had come back reading 'Hardlight Dust constructs at that scale are too complex to maintain for any reasonable usage.'

As the pair stood in starting positions. The dwindling time in the period ticked away—really there was more than a half-hour left due to the extended testing periods—and the need to move and fight built up bit-by-bit.

"Ready?... Go!"

Immediately, Velvet materialized a gauntlet over her left hand, firing a grappling line into the ceiling and hauling her entire body into the air. Soaring all the way up to the ceiling herself, she
'landed' upside down, before pushing off and creating the beginnings of what Ruby thought was a sabre.

Seeing the incoming attack, Jei formed a series of gravity glyphs but didn't activate them. Instead she began moving erratically while summoning a selection of Grimm pieces. The mane of a dunecharger, a horse-like grimm known for their electrical attacks and sandstorm-like stampedes. A nevermore talon, curved and sharp. Both had been successfully secured to a physical polearm before Velvet struck. What looked like a hide of quillringer's spines—a nasty hedgehog grimm who's barbs were infamous for not letting go until the grimm itself was destroyed—were flung away mid-formation and dissipated before they made contact with anything.

The impact was minor, relatively speaking. Only breaking a few arena tiles and sending Jei skidding back instead of flying. But the onslaught was only just beginning. To make up for the loss of range, Velvet brought out twin kama pistols—Emerald's Jasmine and Rajah—and began to take wide, arcing swings which utilized the chains and added intense kinetic energy to each landed blow.

Jei's focus on her glyphs wavered, a few changing sizes and dimming slightly before solidifying again. Several activated at once, catching the Dust constructs mid swing and simultaneously flinging their summoner into a horizontal 'dive'—electrically-charged spear first. It was a strategy often utilized by Weiss to add incredible power behind the piercing point of her rapier. Unfortunately for Jei, Velvet was quite well-versed in not getting stabbed.

Dematerialising her now-stuck weapons, Velvet dropped to her back. Reaching up just before Jei passed overhead, Velvet grabbed hold of Jei's belt and hauled the both of them off-course from the next glyph, flipping the flying girl from parallel with the ground to perpendicular. Jei's aura plummeted to just above the danger line as she was driven into the floor.

Groaning as she attempted to stand, her aura flickering but not broken quite yet. Jei's summons vaporized and remaining glyphs fizzled out. "Owww… owowowow," Jei said, staggering as she recovered. "I don't want to know what that feels like without aura. I give," raising both hands Jei found and unscathed Velvet snapping a picture of her when she could finally focus her eyes.

"No hard feelings, Jade, you did pretty well," Velvet offered a handshake along with the compliment. "Just so you know, I helped your mom with that maneuver back in school," with a wink, Velvet returned to the small collection of chairs that had been slowly acquired during the period from various surrounding classrooms.

There were few things that made Ruby happier than seeing cool weapons. Her family, awesome fights, and her friends all ranked among them. She also enjoyed showing students just how much left to learn there was, and in this case a few of her favorite things just happened to line up all at once. "Fuzz. You're the last one. Hope you're ready," Ruby sing-songed as she skipped into the combat space.

Her steps fell a little lighter, and her smile shone a little brighter.

Ruby Rose was in a very good mood today.

Chapter End Notes
My first (and second) fight scenes! those were oddly hard to start on, I hope they turned out satisfying.

Chapters 1-6 have been condensed into only 1-3, with a single added paragraph to better denote a passage of time (Jaune meeting Cinder in her cabin, and the Beacon Tour have a year gap or so)

Big thanks to WhatOtherPlanet and de_timber for their help

Please leave feedback, because you love me.
and because I love you: you're rocking that look today, keep up the good work.
"Right. Can't forget about fire codes just because of a little panic attack."

"Thank you Miss Emerald. If you would please wait in the waiting area, an elevator will be available shortly."

With that, the holographic receptionist blinked out of existence, leaving Emerald alone in the rebuilt Beacon Tower ground floor. As always, she took a moment to appreciate the comfortable atmosphere of the tower's lobby. If Emerald's memory served, rebuilding the tower had also involved an entirely new interior design strategy.

Once—far back in Emerald’s sometimes all-too detailed memory—the space had been decorated with cold matte colors and once-contemporary—now 'Modern Luminal'—glowing strips along the floor and walls, the cavernous space made deeper by the dark colors of unpainted metal. The new tower was wider and the interiors had all been thankfully updated to something much more inviting. Bright holographic murals of locale from across Remnant cycled on four of the eight walls: this one a Vacuan canyon, that one a rendering of the Forever Fall, another a candid picture of a now-famous snowy mainstreet belonging to the small Atlesian village of Armitage. The walls behind were painted a deep Vale green, but nearly every inch not covered by the holograms was dominated by numerous, wide, clear elevator shafts to accommodate the massive daily traffic from employees and guests. The glass tunnels served as windows to the sleek solid-orange cars, and to the outside beyond. Overall, the color scheme was oddly contrasting, much like the four kingdoms the CCT connected, but worked well together all the same.

Like the kingdoms, and the color choices, very rarely did art historians and pulviologists cross paths, and even more rarely did something come up that required both sides to work together. This week, however, Emerald's unique set of skills were coming into the spotlight; she'd received two emails regarding the same project from two very separate sources. Professor Persimmon, board head for the Anima Art Association—previously Dean of Historical Studies at Vacuo/Vale Academic Collegiate University, Upper Mandate—had been the first to reach out. Followed closely by Doctor Legna Gepetto, one of Emerald's favorite pulviologists of the professors she had interned for.

Both had, probably without realizing the other had done the same, asked Emerald for input on a recently uncovered tapestry from eastern Solitas of all places. It wasn't that Emerald was an expert
on Solitan art or even knew more about ancient references to Dust than Doctor Gepetto, but she held a reputation for connecting previously unconnected traditions or people to a historical record like she had been there when it was happening.

In reality, she just happened to know someone who remembered being present at the creation of the Aka Nishin scrolls.

The tapestry in question had apparently referenced something almost, but not quite, entirely unlike Dust. Or a form of Dust the modern era had no record of. No matter the outcome of her findings, Emerald was promised credit on the final paper and a pleasant stipend for her work. Not that she was hurting for money, but a larger savings never hurt. Not to mention that with midterms in full swing, she didn't have much else to do but a small list of mundane chores.

Luckily, Emerald didn't have much longer to wait. Another holographic receptionist beckoned her over to a waiting elevator. "The Headmaster will see you now. Have a pleasant visit Miss Emerald."

The elevator ride was quick given Emerald was only traveling to the sixteenth floor instead of all the way to the top where the Headmistress' office was located. Emerald may have had a preference for confident, domineering women, but she didn't hate herself that much.

The elevator car slid to a smooth, almost imperceptible stop and gave a not-unpleasant but still informative ding as the doors slid open. On the other side was the smiling face of a man who had seen far too much but had come out at least trying to be optimistic. He was dressed well but comfortably, like someone with a management role in an outdoor profession; all he was missing was a clipboard and a hard hat, and he could walk into almost anywhere without question. Resting at his waist was a silver hilt so well cared for that it was unlikely anyone would ever guess it predated the Kingdoms by several centuries.

"Miss Sus—sorry—Emerald. Good to see you again," Professor Oscar Pine greeted with as much joviality as he could muster. "To what do I—dammit—how've you been?"

Moving in to give the younger man a friendly hug, Emerald couldn't help a small frown of concern crossing her features. "I feel like I should be asking you that. You're not sounding… you today."

That semi-innocent comment caused a dam to burst, and Oscar's hug turned from friendly-hello to hanging-on-for-dear-life. "We've had a tough week," he said. His breaths shuddering and shallow.

"Hey. It's okay." Emerald patted Oscar's back as they continued to stand just outside the now-closed elevator doors. "Do you need to sit down? Should I come back later? I'm not in any rush with this."

"No. Yeah. I should…" he mumbled, before forcing himself to release Emerald and take a step back. Breathing deeply, Oscar composed himself to a state of 'not about to break down crying' which was a massive relief to Emerald. She had seen the man in front of her completely break down at least once before, but this time his usual emotional supports were nowhere nearby to help. "Okay. Right. Let's go to my office. At least to make sure we're not blocking the elevator."

Emerald bobbed her head just slightly sarcastically. "Right. Can't forget about fire codes just because of a little panic attack."

With Oscar leading the way, the two of them made their way around the perimeter of the
octagonal building. A large window stretched to their right, granting a beautiful view of Beacon's roads and foot bridges as they spiderwebbed away from the tower in neatly-planned organization. Emerald's eyes didn't linger too long on the school grounds, however; they were drawn to her left, to a mostly white wall occasionally contrasted by two-tone colored diagonal stripes and doors the same orange as the elevator cars. Between every door, there was at least one work of art displayed. Each and every one sent shivers up Emerald's spine, her memory doing nothing to stop her from slipping back into her time spent within the walls of Castle Evernight. Everything from sculptures and canvas paintings to videos and playable games were displayed with tasteful lighting and their artist's information alongside a not cheap but at least reasonable price. The range of mediums was wide, but the subject was always the same: Grimm.

"I never get used to these. I don't want to even imagine what this hallway looks like at night."

Oscar slowed to a stop in front of a carved driftwood sculpture of a Grimm Emerald had seen before, crawling from their spawning pools, but never learned the name of. With razor-sharp leg plates and three long, tree-trunk thick necks topped with horned heads, she didn't exactly feel the need to ask at the time. "We leave the lights on, mostly," Oscar said with a single humorless chuckle. "People often find my showcase—heh—grim. And I'll admit, it can be unnerving at times to turn around and find a King Taijitu or Manticore staring at you. But I think it's important to remind myself of the dangers all our students will one day have to meet."

Emerald had heard the explanation before, but she didn't mind. The repetition seemed to ground Oscar a bit, helping him recover some of the confidence that'd fled him earlier. She wondered if her presence was helping too. It was strange to imagine herself as a source of stability for someone else.

Emerald utterly failed to suppress a shiver as her attention drifted back to the sculpture. "Doesn't mean I don't get flashbacks to watching them claw their way out of the pits every time I see those eyes, fake or otherwise. There's a reason I didn't take my Huntress exams."

"I— We— …"

"Ozpin?" Emerald offered.

"Ozpin really hated the look of them too. Maybe this is just me trying to make sure he's really gone, as childish as that sounds."

"Using the monsters under your bed to guard against the kind old man upstairs?" the mental image elicited a laugh from Emerald. "If that's not irony….

The thought was ridiculous enough to cause Oscar to first crack a real smile, and then join Emerald in her outburst; A reaction few could claim to have ever elicited from the normally reserved professor.

After calming down, the two of them continued their walk before Oscar slowed in front of another display. "I think this one might fit in your apartment rather nicely, hm?"

"What?" Emerald questioned, unsure she had heard correctly. Taking a look at the piece, another thought came to mind as she stared into the empty red eyes. "Oh, no. I don't want that thing staring at me every time I make a pot of coffee. Besides, I think I know a much better home for it…"
"Right, now that we've got all that settled — you didn't come by just to say hello and help us— me through a rough day and to go shopping for display art, I'm sure." Oscar said from behind his large desk.

Getting out her scroll, Emerald pulled up a series of files on the tapestry she'd been analyzing. Before placing her scroll on the desk's contact surface, she waited for Oscar to draw a bounding circle to place it inside; Emerald could appreciate that digital security was no joke in Beacon Tower these days.

As the quarantine did its job, opening prompts for Oscar to allow her scroll access to the needed systems, Emerald glanced around the office.

It was, for lack of a better word, respectable. It held a window overlooking Vale across the bay, and had all the trappings one might expect from upper management, while lacking all the ornamentation and extravagance. There were several sturdy bookcases containing collections of personal photos and decorations alongside their namesake, a few comfortable chairs for guests, a plush carpet emblazoned with the sigil of Vale, and just a general lack of fashion over function. She'd never asked, but Emerald was fairly certain Oscar had been responsible for all of the woodwork himself. The only pieces that seemed entirely not Oscar original were the interactive desk and a silver clock with three faces: one which read local time and the other two matching one another four hours ahead.

The room darkened as the projectors began their work, displaying panels and renderings of the files Emerald had pulled up: an archeological map, a 3D scan of the tapestry in question, and several excerpts and academic papers on the region and time period. Oscar was Emerald's main source for this research — not her first and certainly not her only.

Emerald began her outline of the known information, utilizing a map and several pictures of the site for visual aid. "This tapestry was recently uncovered in eastern Solitas, during a dig at a pre-Mantle settlement. Beyond that, I'm not entirely sure who or what was present, but this—" she zoomed in on a section of the tapestry itself which showed a group of people, each holding what appeared to be blank faces over their heads. "—is where the questions start. Mostly things for other disciplines, anthropologists and the like."

Oscar considered the image in front of him. "Hmm... I don't think I was present for this, specifically. But the gathering with the faces I do remember from several similar events."

"The Umbrologists think that's Grimm somehow, and they might be right, but I'm more focused on—" Emerald zoomed in again on the crowd. Specifically a single member who wasn't raising a blank face, and was the only one adorned with what could have been skin markings or jewelry instead. "—this."

The conversation that followed was dry but informative. Research was rarely exciting and full of breakthroughs, mostly it was filled with reading and seemingly innocuous questions towards people who only had a slightly better chance of having even an idea as to the answer. Nearly all lines of questioning ended inconclusively, and those that didn't usually just sprouted more research topics and more questions.

There was a reason Doctor Sustrai preferred guarding a room from a tireless, creative, ultimately harmless intruder.

As the sun rotated longer along its great celestial gears, the questions eventually began directing away from the places Oscar's additional memories could help. Mostly to libraries and experts in other, more specific, fields. Two of the three faces on Oscar's silver clock told Emerald they had
been talking for nearly four hours, which was about what she expected the conversation to take
given her past experiences.

As Emerald began to wrap up, collapsing the projections and collecting her scroll from Oscar's
desk, she shot another glance at the three matching clock faces.

Wait…

"Oscar, is your clock broken?" she asked.

Looking up to see for himself, Oscar's brow furrowed in confusion at the synchronized ticking.
"It was working this morning, and I just cleaned it last month. What makes you ask?"

"One face is local time, but others haven't moved since I got here." Emerald replied.

"Not quite, each one is linked to a scroll, mine—" Oscar stood up to take a closer look, before
pulling his head back in surprise. "—and the other two should be in Mistral right now. How in the
"

Oscar was interrupted by his biometrically locked office door swinging open, and a platinum-
headed ten-year-old nearly hanging off the glowing blue doorknob as his face split with a smile.
"Daddy!"

"Kalt!?" Oscar exclaimed, dumbstruck. "You're supposed to be with—"

"Hmm. It's simply cute you think he could get away from me so easily," a well-cultured voice
sounded from the doorway beyond. "Newly-found semblance, or not."

Trying to wrap her head the rapidly unfolding situation in front of her, Emerald peered out into
the windowed hallway and found there wasn't a hallway at all anymore, but an exquisitely
decorated—and in Emerald's opinion, incredibly gaudy—study. Standing just in front of a desk
which was almost an exact clone of Oscar's own, hands elegantly held behind his back, stood a
man in full Schnee colors—eyes and all.

"Ah, Emerald, apologies for intruding on your appointment, but it seems it's just gotten much
easier to schedule our visits to Vale," Whitley Schnee said with a smile. "Join us for lunch?"

Chapter End Notes

Ohey. it's that thing I first teased back in like, chapter 6. (Poor Oscar though. being
two minds and now only one must be hard to come back from)

Kalt's semblance, much like Jei's, is the classic Schnee with a twist: he "summons"
places that he's familiar with/have defined him, but he needs something doorway-like
to do it (hence the doorknob)

YellHead and Mellowyelloww made this chapter what it is, couldn't do it without
them

Feedback is always appreciated, even if it's negative

your ears are especially pretty today, keep doing what you're doing
Memories of Home (Nikki)

Chapter Summary

“I’ve always known, but now I know. You are a bitch,”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"—that's the short version, anyway." she finished with the kind of exhausted sigh that only came from familiarity and repetition. Pyrrha Nikos—Nikki to her friends—had told this story one too many times.

She hated not being able to ever truly move on from it. And she hated that seemingly everyone wanted to know her life so intimately. Mostly, she hated herself for that resentment. All the people who asked weren’t purposefully doing so to hurt her. They didn’t know that every question felt like an arrow through the heart. They were just confused, or concerned, or sometimes they were drunk and she couldn’t very well blame them for that; Nine times out of ten she was the one supplying the drinks.

Those who had simply accepted the return of The Invincible Girl without question were few and far between. Ironically, they had often been the ones Nikki had most wanted to react. Friends and family from literally another life who in this life didn’t know her. Not that she could necessarily blame a dead teenager for never taking the time to befriend, or even meet in some cases, a scattering of people she would have had nothing in common with. But still Nikki found herself doing exactly that sometimes, which did nothing but add to the self-loathing.

Nikki, it seemed, was her own worst enemy these days.

She’d had not-herself worst enemies once. Several at once actually, depending on when you asked her. Her mother had been her worst enemy the day Nikki had been forbidden from attending combat school. Jay Blue had been her worst enemy during her first year at Beacon Academy, blackmailing Nikki like he had. Princess Gretchen had been Nikki’s worst enemy the day she had betrayed Queen Saloma and brought Beacon Academy to ruin. On the same day Neptune Vasilias had also begun his tenure as her worst enemy, atop Beacon Tower, with the murder of one of the most important people in Nikki’s life: Jaune Arc. Finally, Ozma, the mastermind behind it all, had been her worst enemy from the day she had learned his name, until the day he had breathed his last.

Nikki had lost friends and family to see that list cleared. Especially when her world was judged by the gods themselves. She preferred not trying to balance those scales. Whether it was raw chance or divine intervention, Nikki never saw the gavel swing. She was given another chance, another world. This time without an endless war between nations and a mad wizard. A World without the Knights. A World with Jaune Arc.

Too bad he wasn’t Nikki’s Jaune.

He tried to be, just like Nikki had tried to be his Pyrrha, but that wasn’t who they were. Not really. He still knew her in a more intimate form than anyone save maybe Lie or Val ever would. Nikki
and Jaune still meshed so well in combat that it appeared they both had trained the other from basics—Which technically, they had.—knowing just when to duck or swing so that they fought as a single, inseparable entity. Nikki loved those synchronized moments, but she refused to live inside them or for them. She loved her best friend and partner, too. Family didn't give two shits about reality-altering magic like that.

There was a sizeable gap between Cinder Fall and reality though. One that seemed to be widening alongside her eyes as Nikki had told her story.

Cinder responded, after a moment's pause, with all of the poise and confidence Nikki expected. Her face a composed neutrality, born of years beneath her mother's strict gaze and living in the unforgiving circles of Mistrali nobility. "Excuse me?"

"Right, Nikki reminded herself. Not Ash, Cinder.

"Cinder," Ren sighed. His tone like a tired parent berating a child old enough to know better.

Holding her hand out in the multiversal gesture of 'Bitch what?' Cinder looked incredulously back at Ren. "How else am I supposed to respond to a story like that? The Magic part of it I can accept; creating something like life was basically the Relic of Creations's whole thing when Polendina had it. Maidens, you can essentially make a new person with Dust . Give a Relic a boost and, yeah, alright, skip some steps in that process. No problem—"

"Cinder!" Jaune this time, more angry than disappointed.

"—but I draw the line at alternate timelines . What, did the gods just casually make an infinite number of worlds? Please tell me this is all some elaborate prank. I can accept you four just wanting to make me feel like shit for my life choices, but this is too far. Maybe if you were, I don't know, me , this would be reasonabl—…"

Cinder was finally silenced from her rant by a pink-haired Nora glaring at her with such sheer maternal disapproval that she could probably have sent the Grimm themselves to bed without dinner. "Cinder!" was the only word from Nora's mouth, barked loudly and clearly. A single word promising retribution of the highest order.

For her part, Cinder reacted in much the same way Ash had when Queen Saloma had berated her. Shutting her mouth so quickly her teeth clicked, and bowing her head ever so slightly. Nikki couldn't see it, but she knew from pseudo-experience Cinder's eye was trying to burn a hole through the floor with righteous anger.

Nikki mentally warred with herself for a moment before a course of action came out as the clear winner. It was a risky choice, but no matter how much it might hurt to lose this gamble, not trying would wear away at Nikki until the day she died. Nikki could take the pain of defeat, but she refused to go down without trying.

So, Nikki stood from her chair and began to approach at a comfortable pace. She knew she was in no danger, and a slow crossing would portray fear of Cinder. Approaching quickly would be a sign of aggression. She settled herself onto the coffee table before putting the riskier part of her plan into motion.

"Cinder," she began, softly offering her hand towards the brooding doppelganger of her old mentor. "I won't claim to understand you; a lifetime of differences separate the Cinder in front of me from the Ash I knew. But if I've learned one thing since being caught up in all of this—real or fabricated—it's that so little of it matters. I miss the family I knew, yes, but living in the past won't help
anyone. My family here, now, needs help. In a twisted, confusing way, the memory of someone so very like you counts among that old family. Will... can you please try to accept my help? It doesn't have to be now. It doesn't have to be next month. I'm not asking you to be the friend I lost, but will you at least let me be a friend?"

The room was tense, but at least it wasn't from implied violence anymore. Jaune was standing just off the wall, his hands raising and lowering like he wasn't quite sure what he should be doing with them. Ren and Nora had stayed sitting, their hands clasped together—they knew what this all meant to Nikki, and how much Cinder's answer could hurt, but had promised to let it happen one way or another.

Cinder for her part had raised her eye from the ground as Nikki had spoken. First to Nikki's outstretched hand, and then her face. Cinder's brow was furrowed by the end, her scarred face clearly showing her confusion. Her hands hadn't budged from her lap. "Ignoring if what you told me is real or fake—"

"It's real to me. I don't—"

"—ignoring that. You told a fantastical story involving so many familiar names and twisted versions of events. But I can't help but notice that I, or rather Ash, didn't really come up. She was mentioned all of twice, and you definitely put a lot of weight behind that name; more than I ever have, certainly. So, that begs the question: Why? Why blindside me with The Grim Pact? Why go through all this—" Cinder gestured towards the room. "—for someone who reminds you of a footnote in your personal history?"

That... was a question Nikki really should have seen coming. Should have payed more attention across every twist of the arrow that was retelling her story. Because Ash wasn't a footnote to Nikki, she was closer to the paper Nikki's story was printed on. Her presence had always been there, so much so that Nikki stopped noting when it was.

Cinder, so much like her counterpart, refused to let up or let the topic go. "Pyrrha. Nikki. Whatever you want to call yourself. Who was Ash Vermillion to you? Because to me she's a scared little girl who died the day her family did, at the hands of the Grimm. Powerless, scared and alone. A fate I have fought tooth and nail to never share with her."

Ash Vermillion had been the color of her namesake in Nikki's life. A burning flame of hope and inspiration. A prism which reflected the very stuff of life onto those around her and drove them to greatness. The very idea that her impact had been reduced to a single mention of her name... Nikki couldn't abide by a world so empty of the woman. So unaware of what it lacked.

"Ash was... she was Red. As silly as it sounds. A world without red lacks so much passion and warmth. Without red we'd have no orange. No purple. No rich browns of wood or soil. Fire would be limited to mostly tints of yellow. Your clothes, and my hair would just be shades of grey or maybe green. Skin would never blush pink. Bruises would be ugly, dull blue stains. Blood would just be an odd sludge dripping from wounds."

"Poetic, " Cinder snarked. "But not what I asked."

She was right, Cinder hadn't asked what Ash symbolized. "I'm sorry, you're right. Ash Vermillion was... she was my Pyrrha Nikos. A celebrity, undesiring of her fame, and all too willing to be the one to dive headfirst into danger to fulfil her self-imposed destiny."

Cinder cast a wary glance at the others surrounding her. "I'd make a comment about that, but something tells me no tradition on Remnant would do much to stop Nora from making me more of
a cripple if I did."

Nora’s narrowed eyes agreed with Cinder.

"She was deeply afraid of the same things you are, powerlessness, solitude, cowardice. All things she found refuge from in her team—her family. She loved them so completely, and would do anything to protect them."

Nora finally reached her limit, and barked out a single lonely laugh. "Are you sure you're talking about Cinder?" Earning her an incredulous look from Nikki.

Despite the interruption, Cinder didn't even flinch at the accusation. Instead, she leaned back against the couch and… relaxed. "I'd argue, but I really can't disagree with her there. Admittedly I've been proven wrong on the whole 'friends make you weak' stance. Historically so. But have you met Mercury and Emerald? About the only 'love' between the three of us is an ironic 'MOM' tattoo and an unironic delusion of me being an actual mother figure."

"I’ve always known, but now I know. You are a bitch,” Nora retorted.

Cinder cackled at the accusation. "The baddest you'll ever meet."

"Well you're certainly bad at being one," Ren replied. And just like that Nikki's read of the tension in the room was flipped on its head. "At least put some effort into your next attempt. 'Dead Pyrrha' jokes, really? Nikki was right, you do need help. Your routine is as worn out as Jaune's mother."

"Hey!"

"Eight. Kids."

"...Fair." Jaune accepted with a sigh. After less than a second though, his face morphed from mock defeat into a devilish grin. "But hey, I can prove Cinder's a dirty, dirty liar."

"Oh can you now? Shouldn't be too hard, I lie quite a bit." Cinder was egging him on.

Nikki knew this group had a problematic history, sure, but she had no idea how they had moved from what she thought was genuine hatred to… she wasn't sure what was going on. One minute Nora was being held back by Ren, his semblance likely working overtime.

The next?

"Mmm, I don't know, you were pretty honest with a few drinks in you. Your dad's name was Maple. You first wanted to sing to impress a classmate—or his twin sister, you liked them both. And I don't know if it was love, but you and Emerald definitely shared something," Jaune said, comically wagging his eyebrows.

Cinder's face whipped around to Jaune, her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "I'm all for airing out our dirty little secret, Mister Arc, but you don't have to lie to make a point," she said. "Unless you mean I was as good as two women at once," Cinder practically purred, her demeanor shifting towards the feline.

Ren rolled his eyes. "I would tell you two to get a room, but this is your house, Jaune. They're all your rooms."

"Well, they're not all mine—"
Nikki, at last, found her voice. "I... I don't... what?" she said, the words stumbling out like last round had just been called at their favorite bar.

"Oh, uh, we both own the house, so some of the rooms are yours. You know?" Jaune explained, helpfully but also entirely misguided.

"No. How are you all so... calm about all this? You sound like old friends from school, not like you've literally tried to kill each other! Cinder literally killed one of your best friends, and probably countless others." Nikki was sure Jaune Nora and Ren loathed Cinder. She'd made sure The Grim Pact existed on this Remnant before asking Ren to invoke it tonight. "I thought I was going to have to keep you all from poisoning her food tonight or something. She's your Worst Enemy! How are you this relaxed around each other?"

Jaune looked at Nikki with befuddlement. "Worst enemy? I mean, sure, she's done some heinous things—

"She's definitely in the top ten," Nora injected

"—but she's nowhere near the worst."

Ren sagely nodded his affirmation. "The lack of human or Faunus trafficking really knocks her down a few places. Killing another sapient being is an awful waste, and far too common in our line of work. Whether that means premeditated murder, or self-defensive manslaughter. Cinder has shown, if not remorse for her past actions, at least regret where they led and a willingness to change going forward. We don't necessarily like her, but hatred is toxic like few other things."

"You said it yourself, living in the past doesn't help. Cinder was bad, we were kids, and we did—probably still do, if I'm being honest—hate each other. Like Ren said earlier: she's been granted amnesty, not forgiveness."

"Not that I asked for either one."

"Besides, Renny's personal superpower is literally suppressing emotions," Nora piped in. "If you think the three of us can't read Cinder's whole 'I hate myself, wish I'd tried this all sooner, and hate that I ever fell for Salem's empty promises' mood like a bargain bin romance novel...."

Nikki was still having a hard time understanding this. A worst enemy was supposed to be utterly despised, your every waking moment used to strike them from your list. Not... "I thought you all needed my help. That I would get you all to the table, so to speak. That I would have to get all of you to see the reasonable side of things."

Cinder's brow raised in almost-admiration. "Wow. I've got one Alpha of an ego, but that's next level. Did your Remnant not have therapists? I can't call mine amazing, but I can get you his number if you need it."

This night hadn't gone anything like Nikki expected. There were no attempts at revenge, or heated words exchanged. Cinder really was so very different from Ash. This world had been Nikki's home for close to two decades, but it felt like she knew so little about how it all worked. She still felt so alien here sometimes.

Nikki let out a long, tired sigh. The kind that only came after a realization truly rocked one's world. Like coming up for air in a tumultuous sea trying its best to drown you, and finding a rescue boat had found you.

Cinder had already moved on. "So Jaune, you were joking about the drunk threesome, right?"
Chapter End Notes

Happy 4th, Happy Con Weekend, Happy whatever reason you feel deserves some cheering!

Yaaaay! Nikki chapter. had to get my local Pyrrha main deTimber to help me get her voice just right.

WhatOtherPlanet/YellHead, as always giving that good Beta work

Feedback is loved and appreciated, your left heel is looking nice this week.
Public Relations (Blake)

Chapter Summary

Weiss in full ultra-fan mode was always a highlight of the tournament for the rest of the family. At least until security got involved. Again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"... What an uplifting story, Olive. I hope those poor abandoned weapons all find their forever homes soon. Up next on the show, we have a very special pair joining us. You might know them from their incredible philanthropic work with various Faunus-rights movements," Illo Amar announced, introducing the next segment. "Or maybe you know them better as world-renowned slayers of Grimm, kissers of babies, and all around badasses. But today, they're here to give us the rundown on a little thing people have been calling 'The Life Penalty.' Please welcome Mrs Blake Belladonna and Mrs Weiss Rose-Schnee!"

The studio filled with applause as both women exited the relative safety of backstage and once again presented themselves to the public eye. Smiles wide, hands waving, and flawless makeup applied by the artists behind the scenes. They did their best to walk side by side, mostly to avoid any baseless claims of relationship problems or power imbalance. The media would jump on any hint they could make a controversy out of, and they both knew it.

Blake squeezed the supportive hand entwined with hers anyway. Too much synchronicity was arguably worse than a few 'natural' slips and social trades though. So while Blake took the first steps on stage, she made sure to be visible 'helping' Weiss up after her. In response, Weiss offered Blake the seat closest to Illo with only a single refusal and insistence between them. The stage planners were expectedly professional, and had ensured the guest seating was a single couch large enough for four people; in opposition to the show's regular single-chair-and-loveseat layout. It was a small gesture, but the message it sent of a lopsided imbalance with half of the long couch noticeably empty was one Blake appreciated.

The crowd quieted as Weiss took her seat, crossing her legs and sitting with her dictionary-perfect posture and poise. Blake's eyes lingered just a bit on her partner's shapely legs, knee-high boots, single lacy stocking and a form-fitting white dress all working to accentuate just how beautiful the woman wearing them was. The deadly nightshade pinned at her shoulder was a nice touch, and played well with the set of pins that never seemed to leave Weiss' hair.

Blake felt almost casual with her own getup unanimously dubbed The Goodwitch by her family for its close resemblance to their old telekinetic professor's preferred attire; though Blake refused to wear a cape, much to Ruby's dismay. Instead, a white rose was clipped just beneath her upper ear, occasionally it would rub the fur just enough to cause an involuntary flick. The trio of ribbons that didn't seem to have a single resting place today kept Blake's hair bound into a bun, only adding fuel to the Goodwitch fire.

Just as the clapping was beginning to wear on Blake's nerves, the cue signals changed and the audience quickly returned to studio silence. Illo turned his plaster smile away from the crowd and
towards Blake and Weiss. Blake knew the entertainer well enough to know that the stage presence was all an act. Off stage Cobalt was outgoing, but subtle in his mannerisms. More likely to communicate through body language than words. Unfortunately Illo Amar still had a fake, overly friendly smile that set her on edge. "Ladies! So good to see you again," he greeted for the audience. Then he shifted to an almost conspiratorial 'whisper' "do your wives know you're out with another woman?"

Weiss comically narrowed her eyes at Illo. “Well they will if you keep talking. What's your price?”

"Arm and a leg?" he offered.

Weiss rolled her eyes in response.

"Alright, half that."

With no hesitation, Blake reached down to Weiss' ankle and twisted. Her artificial foot disengaged from its setting, and fell into Blake's hand. With a light tug Weiss' boot was pulled off, leaving her leg bare beneath the skirt of her dress. Illo only barely caught the foot-filled boot as it was tossed at him.

"I expect that boot back, it's important to me, " Weiss nonchalantly added.

Illo was stock still for a few seconds, looking utterly bewildered by the boot currently held in his hands. "I gotta say, this is a first. Not sure the Mrs is gonna appreciate another woman's foot on my chest though."

Both Weiss and Blake could only hold their straight faces for so long at that. Quickly giving in and almost doubling over with laughter, accompanied by the studio audience.

Blake could certainly feel a level of admiration for Illo's whole style. With his cycling wardrobe of colored suits and lemon yellow hair that was beginning to grey, it definitely wasn't his fashion Blake enjoyed. He was a character though, always letting his guests in on at least one joke beforehand. Exchanges where he was often the punchline or the buffoon at the end. Despite that, Illo's show Yellow Bellied still had a reputation for solid journalism and giving not-quite-adult viewers at least an idea as to what issues were at play in the adult world.

Even if he left himself far too open for retaliation.

"If you want to shoot for the low-hanging fruit for your jokes, Illo, don't expect us to let you have any slack with our comebacks. I expect better from you." Blake gave a sigh like only a disappointed mother could.

"Oh so I'm the bad guy now?"

"I'm afraid you're wanted for crimes against humor," Weiss deadpanned.

Illo leaned out of view of the camera behind his desk, before popping back up a second later wearing fake glasses and holding briefcase with corners of paper sticking out. "I got some prep done beforehand, I hope you don't mind. But I wasn’t sure how much of a head start I’d get, or is being on your bad side more of a 'sniper already trained on me' type deal?" To emphasise his point, Illo applied a small red sticker to his forehead.

Blake reached across the desk and plucked the sticker away, only to have the red shine of a laser pointer coming from a crew member light up to replace it. "Well, Ruby's busy with midterms this
week. But I'm sure she'd be willing to give you until Monday if you ask nicely. She's always ready for a little H&H."

"H&H? Is that anything like R&R? HhhRest and hhhRelaxation?" Illo swatted at the 'laser sight' and removed his 'disguise' as he sat back down. Keeping the overstuffed briefcase on the far side of his desk and returning Weiss' boot and foot.

"Hunting and Hounding is very relaxing, yes. Just in a more... visceral sense then you might expect," Weiss replied with a small nod as she reattached everything. "Letting the worries of city life drop away and just enjoying the simple things: fresh air, lots of space, the occasional life-or-death grimm encounter, revenge." The whimsical sigh that punctuated the list was entirely real. Blake couldn't help but agree that a good trip into the space between kingdoms really was refreshing like few other things. Even when the reason was less than stellar.

"Sounds like your house can get a bit wild after a while.

"Oh you have no idea. Ruby's bad enough on her own, but add in Yang or Jade and it's practically a z—' Weiss caught herself from saying 'zoo', much to Blake's appreciation. She'd been trying to learn what words just shouldn't be used when Faunus were involved for decades, but occasionally those old habits slipped through. Even Yang made animal puns on rare occasions, and Ruby still liked to 'pet' Blake and Jade's ears. "—a mad house."

"So, that brings me to why you two lovely women are here tonight: The Life Penalty. Or as those of you who are more directly involved with it might say: The Deal. Or the more legal nomenclature: Amnesty. What's the drive to allow dangerous, proven criminals a second chance? Is every jail cell meant to be empty by the end of it all? You seem to clearly enjoy having people to 'H&H'—did I use that right?" Blake and Weiss simultaneously made motions of 'not quite'."—out and about."

The question was a fair one, and completely expected, but that didn't make the answer any easier to give. Like most every foe Blake had come across that couldn't be cut down with a physical weapon, there was no simple answer to give to the masses. "Change requires a catalyst, support, and most of all it requires effort from those involved. Every political or social movement across history, from the Great War to the establishment of the first Menagerie over a century ago, has faced the same struggle. Most fizzled, some self destructed, a select few made it through the tough times and are still constantly showing just how much effort large scale change takes."

Leaning back, Illo's face scrunched up into a look of confusion. "So, what is it you want to change exactly? The penal system? The definition of a monster? Some of the people who are targeted by this system are incredibly dangerous, internationally infamous for their crimes."

"We want to change people. While it is true that some are completely past the point of helping, there are even more within that group who want to, or have, attempted to change from that course," Weiss countered. "We want to allow them to gain access to support systems to promote that way of thinking. To help them rehabilitate, and give back to the society they have done wrong by." Weiss shifted in her chair, likely nervous about the coming explanation. Blake reached a hand out is support, and it was taken gladly. "It's our belief that no one is born evil, villains don't just claw their way to life from pools of dark magic like the Grimm. Some people may be more prone to violence or mental instability, but that doesn't mean they have to deal with those issues alone."

Blake took up one of Illo's earlier questions before he had a chance to shift the topic away. "And it isn't like the selection board just plucks every psychotic maniac and crime lord out of their detention centers. Each candidate is thoroughly vetted and observed for an extended period. They require over three years of well mannered behavior at the moment, or one of directly beneficial,
before they're even considered for the program."

"Alright, then this whole thing is basically a big, fancy parole? What's really the difference? Less red tape?"

Blake really had to respect Illo's job of leading the conversation. He was planting ideas as to what could be wrong with a system like this, but they were simple questions that could be refuted to ease fears and garner support, or left unanswered to promote healthy skepticism and provoke individual thought from his viewers.

"More, actually. The Deal has been active for nearly fifteen years now," Blake answered. "Those involved know all too well the type of backlash that can come from one or two mishandled slip ups. Lots of audits, check-ins with local authorities, oversight. Each candidate is closely monitored by an appropriately skilled Hunter or officer for a period of time. Curfews where needed, and new identities for a select few who might be targeted by extreme elements."

Illo was now leaning almost across his desk in what looked to be amazement. His hands gripped the corners as he tilted his head. "Fifteen years and no escapes? No heel turns, so to speak? I find that a little hard to believe, honestly."

Weiss let go of Blake's hand to give a small, single clap. "You should find that hard to believe. No system is perfect, and there have been those who have tested the safeguards. As of last week's report, twenty-eight people have found themselves removed from the program."

"By 'removed' you mean…"

"Returned to their original sentences due to small rule violations or by request, fortunately. Though there have been mortal consequences for extreme cases; Galeen, Serys, and Thane are all names we regret needing to remember," Blake said soberly, her ears drooping. She remembered the hunt for Thane Rivera, more specifically how she had ended it.

He had escaped custody earlier in the year, leaving his assigned handler in critical condition and fleeing to Vacuo's western coast. As the program began tracking him, he prepared for retaliation by taking control of a local cartel. By the time the authorities arrived, Thane had already established a horrifying child militia, using drugs and violence to control them. Blake had spent the better part of three months, with the help of what passed for police in Vacuo and a team of specialists the Amnesty program had put together, dismantling his operations from the ground up. Eventually his hideout was found and successfully neutralized thanks to a young officer, Pvt. Marbol, who noticed a back entrance less than an hour before the raid began. Thane found his escape at the end of a barrel, instead of a tunnel.

"I'm afraid I can't offer much but my condolences to their loved ones, but I have to hope that's enough." Illo sat, tight lipped and morose in a moment of silence. "You're rather… open about the failings of the system. But really, only twenty-eight? What's the ratio of success here?"

"Honesty and openness solve a whole slew of problems before they even start, even if it takes some getting used to initially," Weiss offered, her body turning slightly towards Blake as she did. "But yes, on a much happier note there are over two-hundred who have 'graduated' from the program. Including my own head of security at the Vale SDC building, Emerald Sustrai. They have proven themselves to be upstanding citizens, and invaluable assets to their teams and workplaces. They do still need a few simple check-ins a year, but the rules aren't nearly as stringent. They're mostly 'let off the l—" Weiss caught herself, unnecessarily this time. Though Blake could appreciate the sentiment and made sure to give her wife the go-ahead with a quick smile. "—leash', as it were."
"So, something like nine-to-one odds for overwhelming success. Sounds like this whole—pardon the pun—deal, is going places, but where is it now? Tell me, if you can, about some of these ongoing second chances."

"Definitely," Blake agreed. "The names and details have been changed to protect identities, of course, but there are a number of active participants we've gotten their approval to talk about. The first, who we'll call 'Autumn', accepted The Deal earlier this year..."

"... By the time Heron made it back to the village, every single surviving home had been successfully evacuated, and the residents relocated to the most defensible building. Ocean was found inside critically wounded, but the villagers were alive. And not a single grimm had made it past the barricade thanks to Ocean's efforts, according to eyewitness accounts." Blake finished. She'd had the audience's full attention with that last story, judging by the stunned silence that followed.

"Wow, I guess some people really take well to the whole second chance. Ocean survived, right?"

Blake nodded in assent. "Living happily, and all too excited to talk about where he got his new scar to anyone who asks. He did say he misses the village potlucks though."

"Glad to hear it! Now with story time out of the way, I think it's time we moved on to the audience interaction. After the break." Illo said to the cameras. He waited for the 'On-Air' sign to dim before leaning back to his stage director somewhere behind the set. "Rakta, if you would find us some volunteers. "Turning back to Weiss and Blake. "And you, Ladies. Are there any topics we shouldn't ask about?"

Blake and Weiss exchanged a look. Both had been through enough public Q&A sessions that they understood just how quickly things could spiral into creepy if allowed to. They had come prepared for the most obvious subjects to avoid already decided on, and both trusted the other to communicate any new addition to that list. None seemed forthcoming. So with a silent nod between them, Blake answered by the script. "No real names or personal details about anyone in the amnesty system who we haven't asked beforehand. Keep it all above the belt."

Illo's response was a curt nod, and making sure his staff knew the restrictions. His audience was given almost complete freedom in their questions, a trait his show was both loved and hated for some times. Some used it to ask what lipstick brand a celebrity preferred, while others would challenge personal philosophies. The only rule for the guests was that they weren't allowed to sidestep the question (or otherwise avoid giving a real answer), unless it broke their given restrictions.

As the crew members found audience members to fill the queue, Blake reached her arm around Weiss' shoulders. More for her own, selfish support than to help Weiss. She had never been one for crowds, and being the center of attention drained her ever more. Weiss was born into this kind of spotlight though, she wouldn't so much as slouch before halfway through the drive home. The gesture was reciprocated in kind, Weiss' arm wrapping around Blake's waist with a firm squeeze.

Soon, the stress would come back, and Blake would dream of curling up on a couch away from
the public eye. Maybe she'd be needed for another emotionally draining manhunt. But for the time being, Blake had just enough home with her to relax a bit.

For now, Weiss was here.

Then, the spell was broken just as quickly as it had come. Interrupted by the sound of fingers tapping on a desk. "Ten seconds," was all Illo whispered once he saw he had their attention.

Unwinding from one another was hard for Blake, the soothing warmth of Weiss disappearing as her own nerves began to return. But, there was a show to put on, and public support to grow. Celebrity was never something Blake had wanted, but here she was all the same, waiting for the last remaining seconds of relief to expire until that little sign lit up and millions of eyes would be on her again.

And just like that, the inevitable future came to pass, the 'On-Air' sign was bright and the stage became a scene full of Illo's personality. "Welcome back to Yellow Bellied. I'm here tonight speaking with Blake Belladonna and Weiss Rose-Schnee about a program the public has taken to calling 'The Life Penalty' and some of their own stories from the front lines of rehabilitation. But enough about me, let's see what you, the people, want to know about my guests in tonight's Rattler's Round." With a flourish, Illo gestured to his crew as a sound clip played to begin the segment.

Blake knew from experience that a graphic was playing across screens the world over, separating the lead-in from the actual segment. She could practically see the trio of entwined snakes slithering across an imaginary screen as crew members counted down on their fingers to keep the flow uninterrupted.

As the stage manager's hand motioned, the first 'Rattler' started off the incoming chain of questions with an almost anticlimactic. "Who do you think will win the upcoming Vytal Tournament?"

"Beacon," Weiss answered immediately, leaving no doubt as to her loyalties when it came to spectator sports.

Blake actually agreed with Weiss as to who would take home the trophy, but she mostly judged who 'won' the tournament by incoming class sizes the school year after the tournament. Plus, just agreeing with Weiss wouldn't be as much fun. "Atlas has a pretty good chance, I think. With Headmistress Schnee at the helm, their competing students are going to be some of the best we've seen for quite some time."

The sideways stink eye Weiss directed towards Blake promised there was going to be facepaint involved with the cheering for Beacon this year. Not that she actually minded; Weiss in full ultra-fan mode was always a highlight of the tournament for the rest of the family. At least until security got involved. Again.

The Rattler's Round didn't give much breathing room between questions, and already the next attendee was breathing in to speak. "How many… Um… Amnestees? Have both of you personally handled?"

That was… not a terrible name for those involved, actually. Maybe a bit close to amputees for Blake's liking, but failing to come up with an appropriate term in a timely manner often lead the public to make one up for you.  

At least it's better than 'Vill-ors'. Blake mentally sighed with relief at the fact Jaune's suggestion
would never see the light of day, even by random chance. "I have four, two of which failed out," — read: I had to track down and kill.— "One only technically can be counted, but Professor Amitola considers herself the very first despite being ten years too early. And the last one is actually a makeup artist for this show. Mel's very public about his involvement. And he also did an amazing job tonight on Illo, don't you think?"

"Only two, I'm afraid. Emerald, I mentioned earlier. The other requested to return to his original sentence after a close call with falling back to old habits. I work primarily on the public relations side of things these days," Weiss admitted.

"How do you live with yourselves and your disgusting lifestyle? Flaunting your sickening homosexuality with no shame or thought to the minds of innocent children?"

What? Blake's train of thought didn't so much derail, as find itself flung by a rampaging giant grimm across her mental countryside. She was, sadly, used to occasional hateful opinions about being in a Human/Faunus relationship, or even the 'unnatural' group union her family enjoyed. But just for loving a woman in the first place? Bigotry came in all forms, but targeting it at same-sex couples was almost as ridiculous as limiting people to finding love in their kingdom of birth.

"Excuse me?" Weiss, it seemed, was not so easily frozen by stupid opinions. "What kind of brownie-up-the-nose id—"

WWRRRUU

Weiss' tirade was suddenly cut short by a piercing siren sounding from every scroll in the building at once. Like two performers dancing on the same stage, the twin tones modulated up and down around one another in a pattern that was impossible to miss or ignore no matter what the surrounding environment might contain. Blake's blood ran cold once her brain parsed just what the particular VIBES pattern meant: Emergency Transport Incoming. It was mostly used in the field for medical evac airships preparing to practically crash land to ensure timely pickup.

The alarm quieted to a level where it was no longer dominating the sound stage, before an almost chipper voice began to speak through the assembled scrolls. "RWBY-2, RWBY-3. Hunter-craft Corvid inbound. Code: Juliette Lima Zero Zero One. Safety Override: Romeo Romeo Sierra One Three Two. High-speed Turn-and-Burn maneuver initiated. Please relocate to designated pickup zone in one mike. Repeat: RWBY-2..."

One-three-two is Ruby's code for 'Laws-be-damned' Juliet Lima? J L... Jade Lily. Blake didn't even look at Weiss before bolting for the nearest door, leaping over obstacles and anyone in her way. Checking her own scroll for the pickup location she didn't see Weiss until she felt herself swept up by the familiar pull of a glyph pulling her to greater speeds.

Using shadows and glyphs in conjunction to round corners and avoid a few near-misses, the two panicking mothers shot out into the Backlot at bone-liquefying speeds. Even as Blake's eyes adjusted to the afternoon sun, the neighboring studio's wall grew terrifyingly close. Weiss, probably even more blinded than Blake, expertly redirected their momentum straight up with a new glyph, sending both rocketing into the partly-cloudy sky.

Just before gravity took back control, a familiar airship sped into place beneath them before flipping itself nose-down. It rose to exactly the height both of them "stood" midair with mechanical precision. As the hydraulic wall installed specifically for this type of pickup caught both Huntresses without so much as a bent knee between them.

As the airship reoriented for proper flight, the pistons propping the wall up lowered
appropriately to keep its occupants standing perpendicular to the ground. The same chipper voice as from the studio began to speaking across the comma. "Nice to see you tod-"

"Cash. Fly," Blake commanded as she and Weiss swiftly buckled into the cockpit seats.

"Yes ma'am."

Chapter End Notes

Oh no. Not the precious Faunus child!

So this trio of chapters is all from alternate perspectives. how's it sitting so far?

As always, WhatOtherPlanet and Shock Factor are both amazing, go read their stuff.

Feedback if you've got it.

I dunno what you did to your eyebrows today, but it's working for you.
Meticulous (Jei)

Chapter Summary

"Like, genetically though."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jade "Jei" Lily—first born child of The Witchhunters (half of them, anyway), second in line to inherit the Schnee Empire (and entirely uninterested in doing so), Princess of the Kingdom of Menagerie (technically), Huntress-in-training (enthusiastically), hater of bedtimes (because, duh), and lover of staring at cute butts (again: Duh)—sat at her desk, and watched the clock.

She wanted to be respectful of all those still taking their Introduction to the Cultures of Remnant midterms. They had just as much right to a focus-friendly environment as she did. It wasn't their fault Jei had blazed through the test like her 'dad' blazed through books during her downtime between assisting with the Amnesty.

Technically she could leave the classroom at any time since she had already turned in her test, but Jei had promised Rea—Jei's partner, Reaper Abyss, who's parents either hated them as a newborn, or wore too much black makeup on a regular basis—she'd stick around for moral support. And when Jei made a promise, she did her best to keep it. Even if they were taking literally forever to finish a test that was basically 'how to not offend everyone' in multiple choice form.

Jei was offended she even needed to take the test at all.

She also needed to work on her internal monologue's sense of humor, but maybe when she wasn't trying to keep quiet. Talking to herself correctly required vocalization after all.

Instead of causing everyone around her to question her mental state, Jei slumped forward across the long gallery desk she was sitting at. Her elbows successfully hung over the edge, but her brow only made it about three fourths of the way. Clearly, this wasn't the way to pass the time she was looking for. But it did shake loose an idea she'd had earlier in the week.

During her mom's class—where Jei had gotten to 'fight' not-actually-her-aunt aunt Velvet, the Moonminder, head-on for the first time ever —Jei had watched Miss Fall cycle between several styles of dagger absentmindedly while waiting for her own fights. Jei probably couldn't copy it exactly, but she liked the idea of nonchalantly flicking at least one of her simpler summons in and out of existence. If for no other reason than to look cool standing in a doorway or back alley one day.

Sitting back up, Jei moved her hands below the desk to keep from distracting those still testing. Her first step had to be deciding just which summon she wanted to use. Couldn't be too big, or else she'd run out of space and maybe bump someone still testing. That ruled out most of the actually useful weapons, honestly. Jei settled on a roughly forearm-length fang from a Sabyr—a mid-sized Atlesian Grimm that looked kind of like a prehistoric cat fossil stood up one day with a thirst for destruction—after a bit of intense self deliberation... and a coin flip.
She brought her hands together, palms up, just to get warmed up. Closing her eyes, Jei took a deep breath and brought up a mental image of a Sabyr. The black body was hazy and poorly defined, but the white of the bone was easy to see contrasted against the colorless void of her mind. Focusing on the fangs Jei opened her eyes and began to push the image into her hands. The feeling of her semblance channeling power into a tangible shape always just felt so right.

Where her mother's summons were heralded by a pristine and perfectly calculated circle containing crisp illustrations, Jei's looked more like some unknown creature was clawing and carving profane rituals into the air. Replacing the neat and pristine snowflakes, swords, or something equally mother, Jei's glyphs were often filled with images of bones, teeth or predatory eyes; though they did share the same bluish-silver glow. Some people found the appearance of her summon glyphs off-putting—like Rea, when they'd first seen one during initiation—but Jei had always thought the jagged lines looked exactly how they should.

Watching the small rips in space open in slow sequence always had a kind of macabre beauty to it. And while Jei didn't need to be so methodical about her semblance after years of practice, she was trying to kill time and figured doing it the slow way could help. Once the glyph completely formed, Jei let her instincts take over. The now-spinning glyph began to do its job, her semblance directing itself to form a sharp, curved blade of Grimm fang took shape.

As it reached the last third, Jei began to take a more active role in the process again. Moving her fingers in small twitches, she carefully altered the circle of her glyph into what looked like a poorly-drawn heart—the actual organ, not the simple shape—and pushed energy through her semblance once more. The result of the misshapen glyph caused the newly forming bone to warp and bend in odd ways, forming a kind of handguard and naturally-worn hilt.

Just as the last few touches were being finalized a tap on her upper ear jolted Jei out of her concentration, causing the carefully modified glyph to dissipate into the aether and taking the dagger along with it wholesale. Well, guess that's what I get for taking my time.

Letting out an annoyed sigh, Jei looked up expecting to see Professor Sitryss admonishing her for causing a distraction. Instead, the apologetic face of her partner greeted her. Rea wasn't sitting though, and their desk was bare of the thick test packet. It took her a second, but once Jei connected the dots that she wasn't shackled to the classroom anymore she collected her sparse testing supplies and (as silently as possible) led the way to the back of the gallery and out the door to freedom.

Once the door was shut, and the soundless void within officially closed off from the outside world again, Jei breathed as deeply and loudly as she could. Punctuating the return to real life with a moaning sigh of relief. "Gods, it feels good to be able to talk again."

"You ever feel weird, saying that?" Rea asked as they motioned for the two of them to move somewhere not just outside the stress-den that was Cultures.

Giving a nod in agreement, the pair started towards one of the many seating areas scattered around the school. Considering the question while they walked, Jei… had no idea what Rea meant. "Saying what? How relieved I am? Not really."

"Not that. Like, your moms met the Brother Gods, didn't they? So isn't saying 'gods' like that just kinda, I dunno, like saying 'Team JNPR' for you?"

"I mean, if you wanna get technical, I think they met or visited every myth-y person and place on Remnant. I'd be completely out of things to swear by if I let that limit me," Jei countered as she picked one of the solid wood chairs and sat down. "I'm pretty sure one of momma's stories is about how she died and went to the afterlife. Whenever she tells that one she usually get something
thrown at her—" Jei shrugged "—so she's probably just being lewd."

"You didn't answer my question." Rea rolled their eyes in annoyance as they leaned against the window sill behind them. Light shone through the glass, wrapping them in a downright heavenly aura and accentuating their curves and contours. Showing off Reaper's muscles underneath their skin-tight arm socks, and glinting off the hard lines of their copper and dark metal chestplate and pauldrons. Their legs stretched for what seemed like miles, covered with form-fitting pants and from the knee down by angularly armored boots. Their long, slender hands were currently free of Rea’s usual gauntlets and were between the cold stone and Rea’s downright hypnotically cute ass.

Jei’s eyes may have lingered for just a second.

What I wouldn't give for those to be my haaaaaaaand okay! Clearly there's some of that Xiao Long lewd passed down to me. Trying her best to keep the conversation going without being too obvious she’d just had a tiny little chain of rapid fire brain-mushening mental images of a certain teammate in a variety of situations which were… less than family friendly, Jei managed to kind of remember what they had been talking about. "Y-yeah, I answered around the question. Much better. More room to wriggle—" which was, unfortunately, a word that just added more fuel the raging fire of mental image tsunamis inside Jei's head, "—b-but ignoring my terrible segue skills for right now. Do you think there's any truth to the rumor that initiation partners usually end up dating?" Jei tried to pass the question off nonchalantly, but she was fairly sure her face was redder than her mom's hood at the moment.

Luckily, Rea had her own face turned away when Jei looked up. "Ignoring the partners who don't uhh… match up in the first place? I dunno. Kali and Nyanza—" Kali O'sha and Nyanza Lush, The other two members of Team ORNJ "—seem like they kinda hate each other," Rea shrugged as she looked back to Jei. "But then there's PWKL going for broke and trying to Entire Team it, kinda like your moms. Don't think that's my game to play, though."

"Yeah, they say it's not for everybody."

"How about you? Planning to follow in their footsteps? Woo the hate birds into a happy little harem? Seduce me with promises of power and mangos?" Rea waggled their eyebrows in the least seductive way Jei may have ever seen as they finished; contorting them in a wave so it looked like two Blind Worms flopping across their forehead.

Jei couldn't hold a straight face very long after that. Breaking into giggles first, and then literally falling out of her chair as she tried to breathe between fits of laughter. She kept just enough mental coherence to file away the fact that Rea could supposedly be paid off in mangos.

Eventually Jei managed to pull herself off the floor, standing to her full height and staring Rea directly in the… collarbone. They were very nice collarbones, but gods — y'know, that does sound kinda weird now that I think about it— did Jei hate that half of her genes were just variations of 'short'. Moving her gaze upwards, Jei definitely found herself stuck at their lips for a split second. With an incredibly strong urge to kiss Rea out of nowhere, just to see what might happen.

Snapping herself out of that train of thought, Jei finally met the infinitely deep navy blue pools with her own heterochromatic eyes. " That would be telling," Jei teased, her blush totally having not faded from her bout of hysterics and for no other reason.

No other reason at all.

Expertly breaking eye contact, Jei then successfully changed the subject to something far less tumultuous and anxiety inducing. "Anyway, we should probably get moving if we're gonna meet
Rea's own slightly red face relaxed as they have an animated eye roll. "You're just saying that because you wanna oogle the Grimm Studies teacher."

Jei's face twisted at the accusation. "Wha- Ew! Gross, Rea. No. I've known Professor Pie since I was, like, three. No, I wanna go see the Grimm, " she said with far more glee in her voice than was normal when speaking about the living nightmare creatures. Jei knew her eyes were practically shining with wonder just thinking about watching grimm in a classroom arena. She wished they'd really shine someday.

One of her eyes was silver, but apparently that wasn't enough to be a Silver Eyed Warrior like her mom. She'd tried, several times, to trigger the Light inside of her. There had been Grimm, there had been a desire, and there had been Jade Lilly… but there had been no blast of anti-Grimm Magical Light.

Rea let out an exasperated sigh as they pushed themselves out of their lean and back to a standing position. "You are so weird. Are you sure you're not related to the Headmaster?"

Jei spun around as she led the way to Professor Pie's classroom, walking backwards and trusting Rea to give her warning of any incoming obstacles. "uhh... I am. Uncle Oscar's got some really cool pieces too."

"Like, genetically though."

"Well, he's my cousin's dad." Jei stopped her backwards stride to strike a pose with her arms at silly angles and her hands held in completely ridiculous shapes "Hashtag Dust-baby-gang."

"Dork," Rea shook her head in disappointment.

"Edgelord."

Rea stuck their tongue out and walked past Jei, leaving a scent in their wake that smelled like fresh cut grass. Jei quickly followed after.

As they walked, Jei's mind completely failed to wander away from the person in front of her. She probably should have been concerned that practically out of nowhere Rea had become one of the most interesting, noteworthy subjects that had ever passed through Jei's brain. It wasn't bad, but it was definitely hard to be coherent through. Everything from their smell to the way their undercut silver hair swayed with each step just demanded to be remembered. It didn't feel like her crushes back in combat school had, but it wasn't wholly a new feeling either. Jei needed advice, and not moms advice. Emmy would probably know. Maybe I can ask her this weekend—

"Hey, isn't that Miss Fall?" Rea asked, breaking Jei's concentration. "Oh dang, it is! And it looks like she's fighting… Uhhh… Jei, what is she fighting?"

Jei followed Rea's pointing finger through the wide observation window positioned so that those not in the circular classroom could still watch whatever was happening at ground level—without needing to watch over the heads of any students, who were in elevated seating above the hallway—and sure enough saw Miss Fall standing on the combat stage, preparing to release a caged… "Oh my gods! They actually managed to wrangle a Splitback into the classroom! Those things are crazy dangerous."

"It looks like a duck, a cactus and a beowolf got drunk and had a threesome. Why is it called a Splitback?"
"You can't see it from this angle, but along the back there's a massive bone plate with a Kraken behind it."

Rea looked away from the window, confusion clear on their face. "A crack in behind it?"

Jei shook her head, but didn't look away from the still-caged monster glaring down the black-haired woman with a glass bow in hand. "No, a Kraken. Grimm squid, in the same way a Leviathan is a Grimm dolphin. Lots of hooked suckers, tentacles and a nasty beak at the center. Nobody's been able to figure out of the Kraken even exists separate from Splitbacks either."

Rea shuddered beside Jei. "I'm glad Professor Pie only had a King Tajitu for us."

"Oh, and the Alphas get a venom coating on all their spines," Jei added, not really paying attention to her partner's words. Too fixated on what promised to be an incredible display of skill from the woman Jei had only known through stories from her moms and Emmy before this school year.

"Jade... please tell me you aren't thinking of leaving the wonderful safety of being not in the same room as that thing to watch the fight."

Jei pulled herself away from the window so she could bring her unamused reaction—upper ears laid back and all—to bear at Rea. "Reaper Abyss, how dare. If we left now, we might miss the fight by the time we slipped through the doors up top. I'll survive not being able to smell the thing. I want to see it. Besides they have the Hard Light field up, not even a nevermore could get into the seating area when those are going full tilt," she offered before returning her attention to the two soon-to-be combatants.

Miss Fall squared her stance, and signaled to someone outside of Jei's view. The ring of field emitters around the area pulsed with increased power, making the plane of Hard Light Dust briefly visible above the area. With another signal the cage holding the Splitback opened, signaling the fight to begin.

Miss Fall made the first move, launching a volley of glass arrows at the Grimm before the cage had even fully opened. Most struck its thick hide and stuck there, some uselessly deflected off the bony plates or 'duck bill' on its face. One arrow was swatted out of its trajectory by a meaty paw, and embedded itself into the wall behind the Splitback so deeply only the fletchings were still visible.

Jei wasn't quite sure if that power had come from the Grimm, or Miss Fall's bow, but either way this was not a friendly fight.

The Splitback, not appreciating the sudden addition of multiple arrows to its body, retaliated by charging headlong towards Miss Fall. It's massive 'backpack' of plating added weight and made for a slow start, but once it got up to speed the Splitback could hit—literally—like a bus. Luckily the distance it needed to get to top speed was something like the length of Amity Arena's main stage, not a training hall.

Miss Fall did something Jei had never expected to counter the charge though. First: a panel of her cybernetic arm opened. Instead of a hidden weapon though, a cloud of something poured onto the ground. Second: Miss Fall didn't so much as flinch while the massive deadly platypus picked up speed. Third: with her flesh hand, she reached to the back of her belt for a Dust reservoir. Miss Fall flicked a switch and Jei saw a series of runes etch their way across her combat gear; dust channels sewn into clothing both for aesthetic and to deliver the supplied type. Finally: Miss Fall waved her hand and the accumulated pile at her side shot forward and assumed a heated glow as
the cloud traveled towards the Grimm. The area between rapidly transformed from a dull flat surface, into what looked like an off-kilter ice cavern.

Instead of a one-eyed TA, The Splitback found itself running headlong into a field of newly-formed glass spikes. With no space to halt its momentum though, the Grimm instead threw itself back-first at the hazardous terrain. Smashing through with its massive bone shield, the Splitback skidded to a halt barely a foot away from Miss Fall.

Before Jei could even see through the cloud of flying shards, most of it again began to glow and swirl in the air. They formed into thick globs around the majority of the Grimm's limbs, trapping the Splitback on its side. Miss Fall stalked forwards and Jei swore she could hear the menacing click of her heels even through the thick observation window.

As Miss Fall rounded her opponent, the large bone plate on the Splitback's back came into view. It was damaged, but only superficially. It's job done, the jagged crack running from top to bottom split slowly, with a collection of tentacles worming their way out and prying the 'egg' wider as they went.

Apparently the process was a quiet one since Miss Fall didn't seem to notice, staring at the Splitback's front like she was. Her lips were moving, and she was pointing to something on the fallen Grimm. If the demonstration Jei had from her own Grimm Studies midterm was any indication, Miss Fall was explaining to the class how one could use a dying Grimm to search for weak points on that type for use in future encounters.

Reaper was pounding on the glass, while Jei waved frantically, both trying to catch the woman's attention before the Splitback could launch a sneak attack.

Unfortunately, Miss Fall wasn't the first to notice them.

As the back plate pried open wider, the Kraken's eyes found the two students behind a window located directly in front of it, instead of Miss Fall behind. The Kraken bunched it's tentacles, before it released the stored energy by launching all of them at the wall. The slight pause as the suckers latched on to both glass and stone equally was the only warning before the Splitback was launched forwards like a slingshot. The long, sharp beak impacted the window directly in front of Jei and sent a massive spider web of cracks across it.

The Kraken pulled itself back, and rammed its beak once more into the thick glass. This time, it breached through. The hole was relatively small, but still large enough to fit a person through.

Jei could hear screams from inside the classroom as the Grimm pulled away again. Professor Pie was shouting for her students to calm down. The Splitback was screaming in rage and pain. Its cries punctuated by the solid, meaty thumps of arrows impacting Grimm flesh.

Before Jei could even react properly, Rea shoved her out of the way, sending Jade sprawling across the floor. Safe, but alone.

Looking back, she could see Reaper Abyss nearly enveloped by the ghastly arms of the Splitback. Their hair flung haphazardly from the sudden rush of motion, and their muscles tensed in fear. Rea’s deep blue eyes were relieved as Jei made eye contact, and quickly filled with fear as tentacles fully looped around their waist.

As the Kraken's black arms ensnared Rea, Jei felt a shock of something run through her body.

Reaper Abyss’ armor groaned under the building pressure and Jade Lilly's world went Silver.
And there we go, 30 chapters (well 27). and we finally get some Jei occurrences outside of the classroom!

 Damn, i was really hoping to get this out before August. Oh well, upside is i started my new job this month, and will be moving (again) sometime during. not to mention my birthday is just around the corner... man, my August is busy.

 as always, big thanks to WhatOtherPlanet and shockfactor. y'all doin great work.

 and side note: Chapter 1 has been completely rewritten. no strictly new info has been added, so don't feel like you absolutely need to go back if you don't want. but it's certainly better done than my initial foray
Chapter Summary

Step two: Panic. But assess the situation anyway.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cinder's world was Silver.

Not just silver. Silver.

Proper noun.

As a marked change from the last several times Cinder had found herself in this odd state of Color—the count got a bit fuzzy after eight—she wasn't screaming in pain. As a fighter with Huntress-like training, Cinder was practiced in the ability to control when, and how much, her brain was smacked upside itself with fight-or-flight hormones to better allow for endurance in combat situations. Against the Splitback Cinder hadn't so much as splashed her face with adrenaline. Once the Silver entered her senses though, her previously controlled adrenaline had spiked in anticipation of pain that never came. For the first time since Cinder's discovery of Silver Eyes and their effects on Grimm-infused humans, her insides weren't being shredded by an unholy passenger as it raged against its anathema. Nor was she being ripped apart at a primordial level, left convulsing against the feeling of her nerves not just burning but being actively destroyed as the Silver sought out its prey along every branch and cluster that made Cinder able to feel the physical world. Her very soul wasn't being subjected to the magical equivalent of bleach and steel wool, worked at back and forth with a simple yet strong abrasive until either the imperfections were hewn away or her body was.

No, this time Cinder's entire existence just felt… minty.

Was this what normal people felt as the Silver washed across them? Could they even perceive the feeling at all? Cinder found that with the relaxing and invigorating feeling of being wrapped in an old blanket, her mind was able to move surprisingly quickly. So quickly that during the otherwise meaningless seconds she had an epiphany relating to children: while screaming for their lives they could be mind-shatteringly loud.

As the Silver light faded, Cinder looked to where the Grimm had just a few seconds ago been attempting to breach its way through the thick window. She knew there wouldn't be more than a pile of dust left of her prey, but she still felt an almost primal pull to make sure the Splitback was truly gone.

Cinder ignored the collective noise from the students above, and approached the scattered stiles of the observation window; still pumped up on that previous spike of adrenaline, but curious as to why Ruby was here at all—she was supposed to be helping one of their students install a belt feed into their weapon today. Expecting a calm and collected Ruby to be offering fresh picked strawberries—or something equally inane—through the empty window frame, Cinder was surprised to see two not-Rubys on the ground instead.
One wore armor that had seen better days, and they were seemingly conscious, and propped against the wall. A second figure's head lay across their legs, their two-tone gold and silver hair being slowly combed by long fingers—

If Cinder had been pleasantly showered in adrenaline before, recognizing the second figure as Ruby's daughter sent a veritable waterfall through her system. It was one thing for a Grimm fight to have some collateral damage and maybe break a few auras, but here were two students with legitimate injuries— and one of them had more (lethal) mothers than Cinder had real limbs. And all four of them were perfectly capable of making the mom:limb ratio even less in Cinder's favor with extreme prejudice.

Luckily, there was a standard shared between both the servants of dark queens and current beacon faculty: first aid training so thorough and intense that Cinder had once successfully posed as a paramedic using it.

Step one: specify somebody to call for help.

"Marble!" Cinder shouted over her shoulder at the professor in charge of the halted Grimm Studies midterm. "Call for medical. We have two students who were caught in the attack."

Step two: Panic. But assess the situation anyway.

Cinder cleared the window frame and surrounding area of any trace of broken glass with barely a conscious application of her semblance and Dust channels in a simplified mimicry of Maiden magic, before hopping through herself and reaching the injured students. With her vision no longer obstructed, she could recognize the still-conscious student as one of the regular visitors to Ruby's lab hours; normally somewhat quiet during class, Reaper Abyss was a first-generation Hunter and it showed in everything from their wearing of actual armor plates to how they tried to put on a show of knowing more about trivial things than their peers.

The normally collected Reaper Abyss stared off into some far away place, clearly in shock, until Cinder tried physical contact to get their attention. "M-miss Fall!" they stammered out as the fog was lifted from their eyes just a touch.

"Pleasantries later, Abyss. Are you hurt?"

They just stared at Cinder at first, before snapping their attention back down to the form of Jade Lilly. "Jei—"

"—will have to wait for the medics anyway," Cinder spat. She had no patience for stupidity at the moment. "Your armor looks like a pile of scrap you'd find in a clueless millionaire's art collection, but you can at least speak, so answer my question. Are. You. Hurt?"

Abyss winced, as they fought to hiss fragments of sentences. "S-scraped and bruised... Barely breathe... Grimm. Crushed armor... Right leg. Tingling. Asleep."

There.

Now she was getting somewhere. Crushed metal plating anywhere on the body was no joke, but survivable. "Right, now you know why so few Hunters wear armor like yours. Try to stay still, and breathe as deep as you can. Keep your Aura down too, if you can: it can complicate the healing procedure in this case. I'm going to check Jade. Medical should be here any second."

Kneeling down, Cinder did her best to get an idea of her condition. Jade was breathing, and her pulse was acceptable. No blood or injuries were evident along her front, sides, or the ground around her, but Cinder wasn't able to check her back—moving the spine of someone who might
have been recently thrown like a ragdoll was less than stellar medical practice. No broken bones. Her silver eyes seemed to be responding to light, though Cinder lacked the requisite pen light to really be one-hundred percent sure. She seemed physically fine, just unconscious.

Cinder breathed a sigh of relief as she finished her evaluation, no long-term injuries were likely to come to either of her students. Her optimism was encouraged by the sound of approaching footsteps. Three impressively muscled medics approached and began preparing to repeat exactly what Cinder had just finished doing. She interrupted them before they even got their crashbags opened.

"The blonde—Jade Lilly—has no physical injuries, but isn't conscious. Reaper Abyss is suffering from light wounds and an impacted chest and leg plate, possible bone damage; I couldn't get beneath the armor."

Without missing a beat the three nodded and jumped ahead in their procedures. One wrote down what Cinder had just told the group in medical jargon, while the other two prepared two collapsible stretchers and worked together to position the students for transport. Cinder would have admired the efficiency of their work had she been able to actually think beyond the autopilot of drilled procedure.

Her mind was racing with all sorts of cyclical, anxiety-inducing questions with no immediate answers. Everything from 'What went wrong' to 'Wasn't Ruby unsure if Jade could use her abilities with only one silver eye?' bounced around behind her eyes. Cinder was so distracted that she didn't even realize she was following the stretcher holding Jei until she was stopped from entering the medical ward by a nurse.

"Miss Fall, are you injured?" the pink-haired roadblock asked sweetly.

"Nothing aura won't fix."

He nodded in response. "Only family members are allowed in for now, so if you would please have a seat," he gently maneuvered Cinder towards a chair with gente, guiding fingertips, as if she were a patient "you've got a mild case of shock, and the only thing keeping you on your feet right now is probably adrenaline. Can I get you anything to drink?"

Practically falling into the chair, Cinder discovered he was right about her energy. Of course he was right, he worked in the medical wing of an Academy. He'd probably seen more victims of shock than she had seen Grimm.

She wanted... she wanted to do something. Eat, maybe. But she was completely unable to stop staring at the water cooler long enough to form a coherent thought. Instead she just allowed her brain to work without her meddling, hoping her autopilot knew what to do right then. "Something warm, please. Tea, preferably."

Hmm. Tea does sound nice. Good job, Cinder.

Why thank you, Cinder. It's so nice to feel appreciated for my talents outside of killing and... not-quite-killing. What's that called again?

The discussion in Cinder's mind should have seemed completely inane, but instead was mildly entertaining. Especially when she tried to remember the word 'syringe' (the closest she managed was 'people-juice baster'). Cinder was so caught up in the strange mental sitcom that she didn't even notice a disposable cup of warmth was clasped in her hands until she was pulled back to reality by flashes of red and yellow in the corner of her vision.
Cinder knew, somewhere in the back of her mind, that Ruby and Yang were probably there to check on their daughter first and foremost, but was still slightly surprised when they didn't approach Cinder at all. They talked between themselves, shared some kind of agreement, and left her alone in the waiting room. Cinder couldn't tell if she was relieved or offended by that, but the thought didn't have much staying power. Before she could completely let the real world fall away again though, even more people arrived to give Cinder something to not really pay attention to through her cloud of adrenaline crash.

First came a dapper bear of a man surrounded by a small posse of bodyguards all dressed in matching blacks and reds. All four guards smoothly split off and took up positions to either side of both doors, leaving the man to enter the ward alone without any signal that Cinder could see. A pair of students who were probably Jade's other teammates arrived next and were given the same treatment as Cinder; Professor Pie was equally unsuccessful a few minutes afterward. Weiss and Blake blazed their way through the doors not long after that, nearly bowling over the guards and pink-haired nurse as did. Cinder saw everything that happened in front of her, but nothing stuck to her brain as it should have.

At least, not until Emerald stepped into the room.

There was no fanfare when Emerald entered. No swarm of bats or singing angels accompanied the woman crossing the aperture of the doorframe. Emerald entered as smoothly as the Thief she had been once upon a time; or someone trying to catch one. She didn't look panicked or overly wary at the sight of the unusual security detail, but did scan the room like the security chief she had become since. Sweeping the corners and hidden places from her vantage point at the door to find security flaws and gaps to either exploit or fix. Her hand automatically reached aside and prevented the door from being anything but closed.

As Emerald's eyes met Cinder's, an almost exaggerated frown crossed her face. She turned away from the waiting area with a scoff that would make Mercury proud.

Unlike the rest of the waiting room party before her, Emerald approached the man at his desk first, instead of approaching the door beyond. He seemed to appreciate the gesture, if his reactionary smile was any indication, but still denied her entry with a shake of his head. Emerald seemed understanding about the—unnecessary, frankly, to Cinder's now less-addled mind—family-only rule though. Just as she turned to leave the nurse alone, Emerald's face turned so that Cinder caught the tail end of a question being asked.

At the volume they had been speaking and at the distance they stood, Cinder couldn't hear their words. But she didn't need to hear to see a finger pointed directly at her.

Emerald barely hesitated in her reaction to whatever information was shared by the nurse; her eyes locked to Cinder's and not so much as blinking while she crossed the distance between them.

Cinder was feeling her first real wave of emotion in cognitive hours—in reality it had only been a bit less than forty-five minutes since her fight with the Splitback had ended—and it wasn't playing well with the butterflies in her ribcage. For the second time in recent memory, Cinder was on the receiving end of Emerald's full, unfriendly, focus. Unlike at the SDC market, however, Cinder was actually somewhat aware of the possible reasons Emerald could be so intensely directed: one of those Emerald considered hers had found themselves in harm's way, and Cinder had been singled out as someone involved.

If she survived whatever Emerald had planned, Cinder's list of enemies was about to get longer by one pink-haired entry.
"Cinder," Emerald said with a tone like the Vacuan salt flats. "Joist tells me you were the one who brought Jei and Reaper in," Emerald punctuated her disbelief with crossed arms before turning towards Cinder's blind spot. "Or was he pointing at you, Marble? Maybe my eyes are going with my age."

Marble, her face probably in its usual state of 'resting bitch', gave something like a laugh in response. "Like you'd miss a detail like that. I had a whole class of weapon-happy bundles of joy to deal with. I had no idea those two were down there until she"—Cinder could practically hear Marble's thumb jammed through the air to indicate her—"said something. Lilly and Abyss are all Cinder's work. Even the medics."

Cinder, deciding that she'd had enough of the waiting room chair she had called home for the past hour, tried her best to stand without showing how tired and stiff her legs felt. She needed to get home and just collapse. But the first step towards that was being able to walk.

"Yes, yes. I'm a—" Cinder didn't get a chance to so much as snark before the fatigue in her muscles caused her to overcompensate just a hair more than she could recover from at the moment. Luckily, Cinder's left side met a very soft, yet sturdy support well before the ground could meet her like an old friend.

That surprisingly comfortable support then did something unexpected.

Emerald wrapped Cinder with solidly muscled arms, and said "Thank you."

It was an awkward thing at first, especially with Cinder literally being held up from falling by the contact. But the seconds ticked by and it showed no signs of being a mistake Cinder slowly found her footing and… leaned in to the hug.

She'd shared quick, friendly hugs a few times since her reintroduction to society. One or two were longer, or meant something extra than just 'hello'. For the first time Cinder felt something beyond just a pair of arms around her, slightly sweaty from shared heat.

Cinder had felt the heat of Light burning away a creature so deeply rooted within her that she could feel it writhe against her soul.

She'd stood in the ashes of burning cities and walked the tunnels of Atlesian Burn Dust mines without a scrap of protection.

But for the first time, Cinder felt warm.

And for the first time, Cinder felt a little bit of warmth flowing the opposite way. Felt a sense of something unfamiliar moving and flowing both ways between herself and Emerald. Unintuitively, no matter how much of the new unknown she felt move out of her, Cinder never felt like she lost any of her own.

She could probably get used to this feeling.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! back to the old Cinder/Ruby/Emerald cycle of chapters!

Damn, I did not mean to take... three weeks to get this one done. but moving (again)
kinda threw me off, as did getting a new job and a few other personal happenings. You know, like my own birthday (which is today, the 23d)

Anyway, thanks for reading as always, and thanks to WhatOtherPlanet and MellowYelloww for the beta work they do.

feedback is always appreciated
Parenting, a Universal Language

Chapter Summary

"if anyone so much as thinks about making a comparison to Professor Goodwitch…"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The recovery room was unnaturally quiet while Ruby anxiously bounced her knee, waiting for Jade to wake up.

The lack of beeping monitors and whirring pumps would have been peculiar if Jade was recovering from some injury or sickness — instead, only the odd sniffle or cough from one of the eight occupants of the room combated the oppressive silence. Well, eight total, but only six were really in a state to make sound; Blake was sleeping with their daughter on the hospital bed. The two breathed silently, wrapped in Ruby's cloak, their ears occasionally twitching at some unknown disturbance. Ruby's heart melted at the sight, though she wished the circumstances were better.

As for the rest: A pair of guards—Gelo and Lem, two of Councilwoman Politan's absolute best —stood silently at the doorway, and if Ruby wasn't already on a first name basis with them from her dealings with the Council’s security detail, she'd definitely wonder if either one ever so much as blinked behind their red sunglasses. The two healthy members of team ORNJ, Kali and Nyanza, were keeping Reaper from going crazy while they were confined to bed rest and practically drowning in flowers, cards, and other get-well-soons.

Jade had told her moms that Reaper had a big family, but Ruby hadn't realized exactly what ‘Family’ she meant until Mr. Xiong himself made an appearance barely minutes after Ruby and Yang had arrived from their respective classrooms.

The sight of the head of what was once among the largest crime families in Vale crashing into a medical ward like a mama bear looking for its cub was probably Ruby's favorite memory from the past week. That, and the look on Junior's face when he realised that between him and his child stood the last person on Remnant he still called 'Sir'. Yang luckily seemed to catch on quicker than Ruby, and directed him to where both Reaper and Jade were getting looked over.

He waited for the next several hours with wringing hands and a few too many ignored calls to be good. Like most who lived their lives within the relative safety of Vale’s walls, Junior wasn’t exactly familiar with just how resilient Hunters could be. He knew they could take beatings, sure, but to the general public Grimm attacks were magnitudes worse than bar brawls or even gang wars.

Reaper had only been hurt... not lightly, but their injuries were far from the worst Ruby had seen across her tenure. Three cracked ribs, two broken, and a femur doing its best impression of Penny Polendina (the first) in the spirit of the upcoming anniversary of her death. There was a real chance that their leg had been severed by the crushed metal plating, but thanks to Cinder’s quick thinking, they were cut out of their armor before the limb before the damage became permanent, and cybernetic replacements were needed. They were mostly healed already, but the bruising had kept them on bedrest.
The Prostheticist's call was still close enough that Ruby had to take stock of just how dangerous her own coin-mail could be to herself. Armor was a rare sight in the Hunter profession for a reason, and this reminder of exactly why that was the case made Ruby reconsider just how closely she wanted to skirt the line between what-ifs.

Jade was fine, at least, when compared to Reaper. She had a scrape or two, but otherwise just wasn't awake. Ruby knew that the rampaging Grimm had one moment been attacking the viewing window then suddenly, after a veritable bomb-blast of light, no longer existed. With some rather obvious clues like Jade condition afterwards and Reaper's account of the Splitback's normally-mortal grip not actually killing them, Ruby put together that Jade's Silver Eye was the most likely source. And from personal experience she knew that the first one felt like an airship crashing through your bones.

For all her life experience, for every world-changing, mind-bending, limit-testing wonder that she had been part of, being on this side of the recovery was novel for Ruby. And she was probably more scared now than she’d ever been while facing down a Grimm.

Ruby fought to keep herself from pacing. Waiting was nerve wracking, even if she knew from personal experience Jade would be fine. Still the anxiety continued to batter against her ribcage, and all Ruby could really do was stare at two of the most important people in her life as they slept on the same hospital bed. Ruby had no idea how her dad had dealt with the stress she and Yang had put him through throughout the years. She was, maybe selfishly, glad that whatever deciding factor responsible for Silver Eyes had skipped Brennen as far as anyone could tell. Ruby wasn’t sure she could handle another three-day wait for one of her babies to wake up.

Whatever other thought had been about to form in Ruby's head was instantly chucked out the nearest window and forgotten. Blake was awake, her ears perked and her widened eyes boring into Ruby's. Her form was visibly tense beneath the red 'blanket' but she hadn't moved otherwise. That kind of reaction could only mean a handful of things, but given the circumstances…

"Mhph… daaaad. Tell the light to shhhhhhh. s'too loud." Jade mumbled as she covered her face with Blake's arm.

Ruby went from being seated along the wall to standing by the bed as quickly as her semblance allowed. She wanted desperately to leap into the air and shower both of them in petals and hugs, but settled for a single crushing hug accompanied by an only slightly ear-shattering squeal of joy.

Blake smiled and moved her arm back, away from Jade's face. "No can do, kitten. You're long overdue for a wake up." She finished with a kiss to each golden ear atop Jade's head and an affectionate squeeze to her on-going hug. Jade squirmed a bit, but didn't exactly put up a fight against the affection.

The curtain separating Jade from her team slid open a fraction. Kali and Nyanza, responding to the influx of happy sounds, poked their heads in, one on top of the other, leaving Reaper to try and lean far enough forward to see through the split without just falling out of their bed completely.

"Besides, kiddo, your team is waiting. Vytal's coming up, remember?" Ruby said.

Jade bolted upright into a sitting position while keeping her eyes screwed shut. "Reaper! Mom, Dad, is Reaper okay? There was a Grimm, and Miss Fall, and Reap—!"

Ruby heard the frustrated 'wumph' of a head falling back into its pillow. "Jei, I swear to JNPR! If the first thing out of your mouth is worrying about me, I will hobble to our room and back, and beat you to death with your massive collection of sex toys!" Reaper practically shouted.
Jade sputtered and blushed at the claim of ownership, but Ruby was honestly more curious about why Reaper had sworn to JNPR of all things.

Reaper cackled briefly until interrupted by Nyanza stepping back and closing the curtain -- followed by the sound of some kind of impact, and finally an incredulous "Ow! Hey, I'm injured!"

Ruby smiled at the good-natured ribbing, reminded of the times Nora, Coco, and Yang had moaned loudly when Pyrrha was in a call with her parents. Blake chuckled wistfully at what was probably the same memory.

Taking that as a cue, Nyanza laughed triumphantly and threw the curtain open the rest of the way, revealing a thoroughly browbeaten Reaper surrounded by the fluffy inards of a pillow. Unphased by whatever cushiony violence had just taken place, Kali closed the remaining distance to Jade's bed.

"We were so worried about you, Jade," Kali fretted. "The doctors said you were okay, but you've been out for like three days! Are you hungry? Thirsty? Do you need another pillow? Less pillows?"

Before Kali could really start rambling, Jade interrupted by using Blake's arm as a haphazard Kali-swatter. "Kay, shush. You sound like my Beba."

Blake played along, doing her best to keep from actually smacking the girl who shared a name with her mother, turning the majority of the action into a hair tussle instead of just rubbing her knuckles into Kali's face repeatedly.

"Your grandma doesn't sound anything like that," Ruby corrected. "Your grandpa though? Total pillow-fluffer."

For her efforts in grandparent pedantism, Ruby received a swat from Blake's *totally still out of control* arm. Ruby dodged in just the wrong way, and instead of getting hit on the boob ended up taking the brunt of the impact to the nose.

"Ack! Not the face, my good looks are the only reason Weiss loves me!"

Blake nearly managed to fall off the bed—*over* the rails specifically designed to prevent that happening—from laughing.

Blake quickly sobered when Kali piped in again. "Jei, are the lights really that bright?" Her brow furrowed with concern. "Sensitivity to light is something you're only supposed to have *just after* a head injury. If you've still got a concussion…" Kali trailed off as Jade sat upright.

Ruby realized he was right. Jade was showing symptoms that she didn't remember going through. And Maria, the only other Silver Eyed anybody Ruby knew personally, had never really spoken about her first experience with her eyes.

"One second, I don't want to bring a doctor in if it's just me being a baby." Jade scrunched her entire face in prelude to squinting one eye open just enough to prove she still could. Looking around the room a bit to get her bearings she winked the lonely silver eye a few times. "Okay, so that one's fine…"

"Some time this month, Jei." Nyanza lightly rapped Jade's head with his knuckles. "Just because you might be dying doesn't mean we're not still dragging you to the Vytal Tournament."

While she definitely didn’t agree with the young man’s brusque delivery, Ruby *was* starting to worry about whether her little girl was going to have to find a way to incorporate an eyepatch into
her everyday fashion.

Reaper was also sick of waiting, apparently. And they had their own style of getting what they wanted that worked just a bit better than motherly encouragement or team pride ever could. "Hey Jei," They called out while fiddling with a scroll that didn’t seem to quite fit their style. “What’s this folder labeled 'Reaper' with your homew—?"

Quicker than maybe even Ruby could move, Jade somehow managed to go from a sitting position into a full-blown pounce towards Reaper’s bed, knocking Kali onto her back and sending Ruby's cloak—and the rest of the bed it rested on—haphazardly in the opposite direction. The sudden motion incited both Blake and Ruby to leap away to a safe distance, towards the door.

Before she could consider how to deal with the situation, Ruby was distracted from the violence that promised to follow when she noticed Lem and Gelo move for the first time in probably hours. Initially Ruby thought they were moving to try and prevent their charge from being used to give the room a new window. Instead both straightened up to look even more professional as the door opened to allow Yang and Weiss entrance.

Ruby wasn't entirely sure which one they were working to impress, given Yang’s history with Junior, and Weiss' with the Council.

Both Yang and Weiss froze in the doorway at the sight of the ongoing kerfuffle, some combination of concern and confusion playing across their faces. Ruby, and probably Blake next to her, couldn’t help but smile as relief washed across their partners' faces — the sounds of chaos were much preferable to graveyard silence.

A particularly expensive-sounding crash brought all four back to the present, causing everyone to wince and turn their eyes to Weiss.

After a quick look around to confirm that everyone was, in fact, looking at her, Weiss sighed in resignation. "I swear," she grumbled as she stalked towards the bedlam, "if anyone so much as thinks about making a comparison to Professor Goodwitch…"

Weiss didn’t waste any time on showy glyph creation or extraneous hand waving. She planted her feet, and not so much as a finger twitched before four student bodies were flawlessly plucked from whatever they were doing by black glyphs forming around their limbs and torsos. The Hunters-in-Training were quickly relocated in front of Weiss as a large yellow glyph spread across the floor, accompanied by a starfield of purple glyphs floating in midair. An additional yellow glyph realized beneath the assembled occupants of the room. What followed was a rapid activation of multiple glyphs at seemingly the same time, some of them with multiple layers of colors all at once.

First (and Ruby knew it was first only because she had asked Weiss once; to her it all looked like a single fluid action) a bubble formed, centered on the smaller of the two yellow glyphs. It served as an anchor of sorts, anything within would be dynamically removed from the ensuing de -ensuing to prevent any weird happenings like having two Yangs who could never ever touch one another… or something like that.

Next, any and all glyphs which contained the purple etchings did their thing, while the massive yellow glyph below began to spin and glow. A chain of afterimages was formed leading from where an item currently was, to wherever it had been a few minutes before. In whatever state it had been in at the time. Liquids, sheets, flower petals now on the ground, every individual item got its own little self history lesson.
A green glyph traced at the end of every trail. And by the time the final trail found its end, the first several items in the sequence had already begun their journey back 'home'.

Every item traveled along its path, flying through the air in rewind, until it reached its corresponding green glyph and froze in place until each and every item in the room was perfectly back in place.

Ruby absolutely refused to believe Weiss' Semblance wasn't big-M Magic when she did things like that. Despite being awestruck, she was still slightly disappointed that Weiss didn't at least flair Myrtenaster — Ruby had been looking forward to seeing how well the newly built custom UHk/x hybrid worked.

When the final flower petal reattached to its bloom, all the glyphs blinked out at once, and the room was rendered as pristine as it had been minutes before. The anchor bubbled faded, and the room was once again bloated with silence. Silent, that is, except for the sound of Weiss tapping her shoe menacingly, and the subtle hum of the glyphs which still suspended the four students in midair.

"Reaper," Weiss said with a kind of courtroom pleasantness.

They snapped to as much attention as one could while hanging parallel to the floor. "Yes, ma'am."

"Have the doctors told you when you can return to regular activity?"

"T-today. But I have to keep the strain light until Monday."

Weiss nodded imperiously, and righted them into a standing position before releasing the glyphs holding them in place, and repeated the action for their non-Jade teammates. "You two, make sure they don't hurt themselves."

"Of course."

"No promises."

She nodded once more before turning to her daughter, who was floating upside down and facing away from everyone. With a twirl of her finger, Weiss gently flipped Jade and released her to stand on her own two feet — and wrapped her in a hug. Ruby certainly didn't need a signal more clear than that, and rushed to add herself to the affection, closely followed by Blake.

Being at the center of three moms, Jade was surrounded by love. Until all four were wrapped up by yet another pair of arms and lifted into the air.

And then she was being *crushed* by love.

And Yang.

Love and Yang.

"Ack, okay. Now I know how Rea felt."

Ruby looked down to see Jade's Silver eyes popping out of her skull like a cartoon character—… silver eyes? Plural?

Emerald Sustrai, Ruby was not. But she *definitely* remembered the color of her own daughter's
eyes. And there was a disturbing lack of gold in Jade’s left eye. No adorable heterochromatic reflection greeted Ruby’s pure silver eyes.

Well, Ruby thought as Yang lowered them to the ground, no eyepatch needed, at least. She hugged her daughter tighter, trying to put the issue out of her mind for the moment. Whatever’s going on can wait a few more minutes.

And if it can’t, I’m going to drag a certain pair of immortals back to Remnant at the end of a leash.

Chapter End Notes

weeee! didn’t expect that to take a month, but birthdays and the preplanning for another fic kinda got in the way, but here we are!

huge shout out to deTimber, YellHead and MellowYelloww for the beta and prereading they did. legitimately rewrote maybe 30% of it in the course of two days.

you are loved, and I love feedback.
Emerald sipped from an old well-loved coffee mug, trying to work her way through questions so far above her pay grade they probably had vacation estates for when they weren't rattling around her skull. Questions like that made it hard for Emerald to relax. Harder still to sleep. So for now, she used the empty hours of the night to her advantage.

Emerald wanted to believe people could change.

Having successfully elevated herself from a street rat with a knack for petty theft and getting away with murder, into an upstanding, job-holding, contributor to society; Emerald was living proof that, given the right opportunity, and support, one could turn their life around.

But…

And isn't there always a 'but'?

Beyond just natural change of opinion over the years. Beyond liking a different blend of coffee than she once had. Had Emerald actually changed?

Was she a better person than she had been? Not in some karmic sense; That was getting into philosophy, balancing scales, and all sorts of even bigger, private-island level thoughts. But how much of it all had been Emerald, and how much had just been her environment pushing her towards or away from certain actions?

How much was Cinder to blame for how she treated those around her?

Emerald watched the snow as it fell carelessly into the morning streets.

She wished the cold white blanket layering onto the world was pristine, untouched by color and waiting for the brush of people to find it yet. Instead, not terribly unlike herself, Vale seemed to have trouble sleeping this morning. Plows, salt trucks, shovellers, snowblowers, all working to break the fleeting illusion of newness and purity just a little bit sooner for a persistent reality that people needed to get to work, heedless of the wonderland they trudged through to get there.

Contrary to the snowy blanket of the city, Emerald's fuzzy cocoon of cozy was well situated on her shoulders and not going anywhere until she was damn ready. Which probably wouldn't happen until her supply of coffee ran out, or the building burned down around her.

A toasty blanket, a hot mug, and that endlessly entertaining mindspace between sleep and creative fugue. What else was a girl to do but sit and enjoy the little orange and yellow fireflies below, diligently working to melt away the beautiful veil of a slow death from the sleeping world? Leaning against the thin, cool barrier that was the only thing separating the haven of Emerald's
hearth from the contradictory tumultuous calm without. Letting the comforting smell of home mingle with the invigorating vapors of brewed awakening.

... I need to read less A. S. Pumpkin. His last collection was amazing, but I'm starting to wax poetic about windows.

Emerald would have liked to claim that the sky lightened while she sat there in her windowsill, romantically staring into the city and thinking deep thoughts. But in reality it was something like two in the morning and the largest source of light was the holographic ad playing on the building across the street and two blocks down. And her bladder interrupted the poetry long before she really got to fall into the seemingly endless moment.

Reluctantly leaving her impromptu nest, Emerald tried to make as little noise as possible so as not to wake her sleeping guest while she relieved herself.

It was a small gesture of what some might consider good manners, taught in their household with good intentions. Though Emerald had learned it during her childhood, she was fairly sure it was from a house of much less repute than most. Long gone were the days of not waking her parent's 'friends', but the habit just never saw fit to leave Emerald's behavior in all the years and adventures since.

And so when Emerald, now very much relieved, returned to her living room only to find the form of Cinder sitting in her window, she dismissed it as just her own subconscious desires hijacking her Semblance again. There was no way she would willingly be out of bed any time before sunrise.

Being haunted by visions of people wasn't a new experience for Emerald. It had started at Haven, with Salem. Emerald sometimes thought that it was the first real 'evolution' of her semblance, the ability to bring a mostly autonomous image into play. The downside being that she was usually forced to interact with whoever it was that she wanted to avoid. Sometimes it was one of her fathers. A few times it was her mother. Mercury, once. Jei and Brennen had been seen in the corner of her eye a handful of times once she’d met them. But most often Cinder was the image she conjured.

Having a semblance that tricked and deceived certainly had its upsides. Her hallucinations had limits to what they could do, just like every semblance did. Most believed that she had no ability to simulate taste or touch, but that was just another lie she told the world. What Emerald couldn't force another mind to perceive was resistance. Pressure, on the other hand, was one of the first tricks she ever learned. It was infinitely useful in committing crimes and winning fights. Along with passively enhanced memory to let her remember any event she was present for, she was even a living, court-permissible security camera when the need arose. And a great teller of bedtime stories besides.

To achieve that level of accuracy though, regardless of the subject or target, the one person it always had to fool first was Emerald herself. If she didn't believe the hallucination was real to some extent, there was no way another mind would accept it as anything more than a passing suggestion. And that led to situations like the one she found herself in now: tired enough to be self-targeting an image of the woman currently asleep in Emerald's bed to keep her company in the dark hours of the morning.

The specter's golden eye seemed to blaze through the shadows as 'Cinder' turned away from the outside glow. It flicked up and down Emerald's body, a decent appropriation of interest in a room too dark to actually see an expression. "I'll admit," the fake Cinder said as she moved her eye back up to Emerald's face. "The 2 AM nudity is bolder than expected."
Emerald snorted humorlessly before whisper-yelling, "Eat my ass. And get out of my spot if you
don't want to make it literal."

The fake Cinder seemed surprised at the harsh response but quickly relocated to the other side
of the sill, leaving Emerald to re-wrap herself in the fuzzy embrace of her window blanket and
return to staring out into the streets below.

She really didn't feel like dealing with a hallucination composed of her own repressed anxieties
right now. So what if Emerald wasn't wearing anything in her own home? She was already sleeping
on the couch for the past week, and that sacrifice was more than enough. She'd worry about being
socially acceptable later; right now there was snow to watch fall, and a real Cinder to avoid waking
up with a one-sided emotional screaming match. This fake Cinder wasn't worth the emotional
energy it took to work through whatever turmoil she was supposed to represent.

Too bad for Emerald, 'Cinder' didn't feel the same desire for peaceful silence.

"I don't think I've ever seen you this…" 'Cinder' said, before gesticulating for a moment, "icy.
Not even to Mercury."

Figuring that the situation wasn't going to resolve itself, Emerald heaved a sigh and turned to
level her ire at the fake. "Even if you ignore the time spent sleeping on the road where it wasn't
really an option, we shared a Beacon dorm room for almost a year. And somehow, despite at one
point watching me get ready for bed, you missed the fact that I sleep nude until less than five
minutes ago. I'm not exactly shy about it." Emerald wanted to leave the topic there and return to
ignoring her rather currently-not-so-inner demon, but some long-suppressed box of feelings
decided that a fake Cinder was the perfect target to release its contents onto like a flood of sewage
and spite. "You're so clueless sometimes. I've seen you read people's life stories in how they order
food at a restaurant. You've told strangers exactly what they want to hear to get them to fall head
over heels in a sentence. I knew you were using me from the beginning. That was how we met: you
cornered me, offered me a deal... I couldn't say no. I just… how did I ever think you could care
about anything that didn't serve you?"

The fake tried to respond somehow, but Emerald was too focused on realizing that the mental
box of emotions wasn't really relieving some pressure, so much as it was reduced to a pile of soggy
splinters and shrapnel. It hadn't taken long for all the emotions trapped inside to explode out and
crash back down to rock bottom, leaving Emerald exhausted.

Exhausted, and with a single sentence left dangling on the edge of her tongue. A sentence
normally buried in the box deeper than any other. One that Emerald had promised herself she
would never utter, for fear of just how much the answer would hurt.

But right now, as stupid as the whole situation was, the sentence was almost out in the open.
Almost free to hurt Emerald. And… Emerald was already hurting. It wasn't even particularly bad
as far as her experience with pain went. But still it made her question just why she held this
sentence back so vehemently. She'd already experienced the lowest lows without its intervention.
What more could one sentence actually do?

And so, Emerald let it fall. Let the villainous words finally enter the physical world. "... How
could I ever think you could ever actually care about me? " It came out as a choked not-quite-
whisper that did little justice to the emotion behind the question.

To finally say it out loud felt like someone had just landed a kick firmly on Emerald's throat, and
left her… Emerald wished she could say 'empty'. She wished she didn't feel the shame and disgust
that she did. She felt, though. Felt like she was stupid for having said that to a figment of her
overactive subconscious. Felt like throwing her couch through the window. Like jumping into her bed—Cinder's presence be damned—and reclaiming that small slice of comfort back for herself.

Emerald felt like trying to drown herself in something. Metaphorical or physical were both equally attractive in the moment. She just wanted to feel something that wasn't this.

And for some reason that thought paralyzed her with fear.

Why does that scare me? Was the only sentence Emerald could think for what seemed like hours. Endlessly looping and spiraling into itself like a King Taijitu, twisted by the dark mind of Salem herself for no other purpose than to make Emerald suffer.

There were no emotions left to out pour from Emerald. No great catharsis to be had in words. They were said to what Emerald perceived as a specter of the woman she wanted, but who's attention had only ever lead to destruction. The words would never make it to Cinder's ears, they were just Emerald talking to herself.

Here in her tower, above the world and locked away, Emerald wasn't some princess to be rescued by her daring dark knight. Her dragon wasn't some fire breathing lizard. No outside force bound her to this place against her will.

It was all just Emerald.

She didn't know how long she sat like that. Didn't keep track of the passing night or the falling snow.

But eventually, still before the sky began to lighten, Emerald was slowly drawn back from whatever nameless void of emotion she had been spiraling into by a soothing warmth.

It was a ghostly specter of warmth, but it was there all the same. Like someone had lit a candle in a fireplace and called it good enough.

Where most heat was shapeless, this felt like a hand lightly brushing over her hair.

The warmth had a sound, too. Like the old recording of Cinder singing that Emerald had kept over the years, that she played to calm her down when she was stressed and sleepless. She didn't know what song it was, but the words weren't the important part.

Emerald stared out the window as she tried to piece herself back together. Slowly working her way to the point that moving back to the couch was a feasible course of action. All the while, the gentle breath of a song she didn't understand gently anchored her thoughts.

The gentle lullaby eventually came to an end, as all songs do. It left the room silent except for the ever-present background hum of running appliances. It wasn't an awkward or comfortable silence, just a lack of sound between moments. Emerald wouldn't remember this night for its silence though. She would remember thanks to what broke it.

A single, simple question breached the silence. It was asked under a breath, likely never meant to be heard.

"Will you help me try?"

Emerald closed her eyes, wishing to find sleep while the night was dark. And slowly drifted off, wrapped in her blanket, and lying in her window nook.
Excuse me, Ma'am, that is my Emotional Support Cinder.

this hurt to write, because originally it was intended to be like a 500 word scene to set up the chapter I actually had in mind. but it's a monster all it's own.

I love me some feedback though, so share it if you've got it.
Cinder glared daggers at the smartly-dressed young man from the door to Emerald's apartment. "I'm being what, again?"

After yesterday had chewed, gargled, and spat her out, Cinder didn't expect to hear anything but news of her immediate termination, perhaps delivered in the form of a supersonic bullet to the skull. Perhaps if her executioner were feeling especially lenient, she'd be informed of her students' conditions, or given some time to write up a last will and testament, before justice was served.

"Temporarily evicted, Ms. Fall." He seemed almost bored about needing to repeat himself. She could have sworn he was looking at her forehead instead of actually making eye contact. "As part of the investigation into the recent incident at the Beacon Academy combat presentation halls involving yourself, a —the man took a moment to look through his legal pad— "Splitbeak? Grimm, and two students who shall not be named, per standard Academy policy, any and all Academy property which may provide useful insight into this case is to be quarantined as soon as possible to prevent disruption of evidence. Of course, you are being given a stipend for room and board in the interim. And should you be cleared of suspicion, the Academy will reimburse any documented living expenses over the course of your suspension."

Cinder blinked, already mourning the loss of the hearty little mint plant which had somehow managed to do more than wilt away immediately under her watch. but she couldn’t very well show concern for poor Marbrook Mint in front of a stranger, Cinder’s pride was wounded enough already from the events of yesterday and the investigation related to it.

She'd never exactly seen an investigation from this side of things. She understood how they worked well enough from years of avoiding, derailing, or otherwise redirecting them, but had never much cared to find out what it was like to be investigated for something she hadn’t planned to be. "So go seal off Arena ‘J’ then. And leave my apartment out of this."

The man sighed and pressed his legal pad to his forehead in something close to exasperation, his tone somewhere between Salem and Watts on the self-importance scale. "'Your' apartment is lega —"

"'—Legally the property of the Academy and its partners. Leased to 'Signatory A' for as long as they are employed with the Academy and continually reside within, with no sum leaves of absence oooooaaaahhhff— " Emerald's droning recital was cut short by an extended yawn, after which she began a perilous journey from the bathroom, her head still covered by a mint-green bath towel. Cinder couldn't keep her eyes off of Emerald’s dripping form while she groggily crossed the living room to the somewhat messy kitchen. It felt like every step she took required Cinder's observation in order to occur at all, like every lean and shuffle needed to be watched and remembered according to some inscrutable law of the universe.
The evictor apparently found shower-fresh Emerald just as enthralling as she had. When Cinder turned back to him, he was staring at the wall like wanting it hard enough would allow him to see through it. A familiar edge entered Cinder's mind at his audacity. No, not audacity. *Belligerence*.

It was the edge of *territory*.

Of her territory.

Cinder could feel her mechanical arm's internal workings 'twitching' to open the reservoirs of materials needed to flashforge a blade. She felt the long-useless habit siphoning the power of a Maiden from the tumorous growth on her soul it had once resided in. She wanted to leave this sad little boy in a pool of blood for so much as *glimpsing* the private life of Emerald Sustrai without permission.

Cinder settled for upping her glaring game from 'daggers' to 'blood-quenched claymores', and stepping out into the hallway.

The man gave his head a shake and returned his attention back to an unamused Cinder closing the door with a silent smoothness than ended with the only sound along the hallway a threatening 'click' of the latch closing. "Err. Yes. Exactly that. Your apartment is technically academy property, and will be searched as part of the investigation due to your… *messy* history with the families of the two students."

"I see," Cinder said flatly. "When are the investigator's office hours? I need to get some things together if I can't use my apartment for Evernight knows how long."

"Ah, right. Well." The man shifted uncomfortably. "Normally the subject of these investigations is either home or out of town. When you weren’t present to request a delay, the head detective began the process immediately. The investigation *should* be done by the end of the week, if all goes well. But the notice is effective immediately. I'm here to inform you, confirm you're still in contact with at least one of your supervisory contacts, and collect any keys to the location being investigated to ensure its security from tampering during the investigative period."

Cinder thought about what he had said for a moment. She was now effectively homeless, with only really her combat dress, wallet, and whatever else she'd had on her yesterday for the next week, with no real notice. She had been granted the means to go about her life without much interruptions, so she had no legal ground to argue from. And worst of all… "Blinding you with several glass needles isn't going to miraculously speed this process up, is it?" Cinder asked as she almost seductively placed a hand on his shoulder.

Cinder could smell the exact second when her words made it through the young man's skull. She watched as a bead of sweat formed almost immediately at his hairline. "N-no. But it—" He didn't get a chance to finish whatever idiotic, bumbling response he was trying to give. Cinder shushed him with a raised finger.

She smiled sweetly at his rising fear, "I just needed a yes or no." Feeling the rush of power that came with reducing the defiant man to practically a quivering mess Cinder pulled him closer, into something she could quickly turn into a Widow's Embrace, and began whispering in his ear.

"Besides, I'm sure I'm only allowed out 'on my own' because I'm not really alone. Isn't that right, Ruby?"

"Wh... Ma'am, My name is Rhu *barb*. I introduced myself earlier," he said. Cinder could feel him shift in an attempt to move away from her. "Can... I'm very uncomfortable right now, can you let me go?"
That makes two of us. Cinder thought as she realised he was telling the truth. With a quick push of her Aura, Cinder searched for anyone standing just outside her range of vision. Relieved to find there was no other witnesses she would have to silence, she did her best to smoothly release Rhubarb with a pat on the shoulder and a smile that promised extreme regret should he in any way mention her embarrassing mistake.

Or if she caught him staring at something that was hers ever again.

Wanting to put whole debacle behind her as soon as possible, Cinder reached into one of the pouches along her belt and felt for the ring of mementos that also occasionally held keys, one of which now needed to be removed from its annoying metal home.

After what felt like far too long for something so simple, Cinder finally presented the key to Rhubarb as nonchalantly as she could. "I use a scroll lock, but here. And if there’s nothing else..."

"T-thank you, Miss Fall," Rhubarb said, still sweating and panicked by the whiplash conversation. "You should receive a message from the Academy pertaining to your stipend sometime today."

And without so much as another word he bolted for the elevators, leaving Cinder alone in the hallway. Not quite wanting to process learning that she wasn’t allowed to go home for a week, she distracted herself by taking inventory of the chain resting in her palm.

There was the key to her classroom; an endearing plastic Ursa which Cinder had long forgotten the original story behind but that had become the closest thing she’d ever had to a pet; a finger-smoothed rock which had once read ‘Fate’; a vial of the Bonding Dust sampled from her first successful mixing experiment with the first period class; and the small black feather she’d received from Brennen last month.

That last one was her current favorite.

And as Cinder turned to re-enter Emerald's apartment, she realised something very important was wrong: the door wasn’t letting her in. Until now she had no use for a key, the door would just unlock once her scroll was close enough—Emerald had added her to the whitelist some time ago. But as Cinder searched her pockets and pouches, it dawned on her that her scroll was probably still sitting on the counter next to the coffee machine where she had been standing when the doorbell rang.

I wonder if replacing a door counts as ‘living expenses’? Something tells me no...

Sucking up her oh-so-battered pride, Cinder chose the path of least destruction and rang the doorbell, not entirely trusting herself to knock without punching through the door on ‘accident’.

What greeted her when the door opened was an… experience. It wasn’t as though Cinder was seeing Emerald for the first time. In fact it was almost exactly like every other time Emerald had opened a door for Cinder.

Her hair was mussed and frizzy from the towel, her eyes still half closed, and the towels tied around her doing no favors in the fashion department. But still, there was some aspect to this moment that was paralyzing to Cinder. Some small voice in her head was screaming at Cinder to be an idiot, or to chop off her other arm, or try to do a handstand on the wall.

Cinder wanted nothing more than to do a handstand on the wall right now.

Anything to make that Magic-Damned frown on Emerald's face go away.
"How did you even get stuck out here?"

"I…” Cinder hesitated, which really wasn't like her. Even recently, while being thrown against the nightmarish waves of normality and civilian life after her failures, Cinder couldn't remember hesitating with anyone. It wasn't that she didn't have something to say, or even too many things to say crashing out of her mouth at once. There were only two words on the tip of her tongue, but she just couldn't get them out.

'Thank you' seemed so simple a sentence until it had meaning behind it. She'd said the words before. Made the phonetic sounds to communicate with vibrations of air to another being. But Cinder couldn't remember the last time she had meant them with any sort of authenticity. And now that she had that — meaning, authenticity — she couldn't find the will to actually say the words.

Maybe it was because they meant more than just "thank you for opening this door." Maybe it was because she feared Emerald would think the words too small, or too late, to ever actually mean anything.

So, instead Cinder spun her now single-key chain around her finger and said the only other thing she could think of, "Is the coffee still hot?" which admittedly sounded a lot less prickly in her head.

Emerald rolled her eyes but ushered Cinder in all the same, letting her glimpse her faint smile. "That is part of what a coffee machine is for," she chided.

As Cinder entered the kitchen, she saw that the coffee maker, in fact, hadn't even finished making the pot yet. Her scroll was on top of it, like she'd thought. Hurrying to grab herself a mug for the bitter brown morning potion, Cinder absent-mindedly left her keychain in front of a bowl containing what she assumed was Emerald’s breakfast. Hopefully, the heartburn and caffeine would kickstart Cinder away from the uncharacteristic feelings of attachment she'd been having all morning.

Though given the news she'd just received, one order of business was particularly pressing. "Would you care to accompany me to the mall later? I need some clothes for the next week."

"Do I want to know?"

"Beacon wants to make sure the Splitback going after Jade and Reaper was an accident." Cinder shrugged as she looked up from pouring herself a mug of coffee and saw Emerald playing with the toy Ursa around the rim of her breakfast. "And my apartment is apparently a place for living and plotting revenge."

Really, who plots revenge in their primary residence? Amateurs, and idiots, Cinder scoffed mentally before opening her mouth to ask Emerald about possibly staying with her for the immediate future.

Before she could get a sound out though, Emerald held up the vial of Dust on Cinder’s key chain to the light. "Hey, what kind of Dust do you keep on this? Can't say I've ever seen silver."

Silver? Cinder thought.
Yeee, Cinder. finally starting to (hopefully) figure things out. And Emerald... has questions

Well, that was... 5 weeks longer than I wanted. My b. Happy v7, by the by! new episode is quite nice.

Thanks to Yellhead, DeTimber, and MellowYelloww for the kick-ass beta reader-ing they do.

As always, your toes are gorgeous (and you don't have toes, then I'm sure the nubs are just as beautiful) and I love feedback.
Love in the Air

Chapter Summary

Somewhere between the prime time sitcoms and a marathon of Spruce Willis movies, the couch snuggles were interrupted by a three-way harmony of battle cries.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ruby slumped against the doorframe, her energy gone, and her mind a tangle of half-ideas that couldn't quite seem to fit in the last train of the day. Her eyes were wide open, and her shoulders were square, but she knew that her eyes looked like they belonged to the sole survivor of an Apathy horde.

She was looking forward to having her assistant back. Not having one was a death wish when it came to matters of the classroom. Until just this past week or two though, Ruby hadn't realised just how much of her workload Cinder had taken on over the course of the school year. It felt like every day Cinder had been benched due to the investigation, she'd been teaching twice as many students in two-thirds the time. She knew she'd handled it all before, but after a day like today she wasn't quite sure how.

Finally, after mustering the energy to twist the knob, Ruby was greeted by the strangely homey smell of sweatboots, some kind of air freshener that wasn't doing a great job, dog, and whatever had died in the doorframe, all mingling into a cacophony of scents that should have been nose-crinkling. Instead, she felt the stress of the day melt away like the flurries of snow that fluttered onto her head from the grey skies.

I love the smell of Wednesday night.

As she stepped through the door, Ruby was met with not just them smells of the house, but its subtle sounds. The hum of appliances through the walls was overshadowed by a chorus of welcomes from a variety of voices deeper in.

"Welcome home!"
"Hey mom!"
"Arf!"
"Ruby!"

Even those gave way to the sound of not-quite-so-little-anymore feet slapping against hardwood flooring at a dead sprint.

"Moooooom!" shouted Brennan as he rounded the staircase, pivoting at dangerous speeds around the banister.

Ruby's face split into a grin, and every inch of her wanted nothing more than to sweep Brennen up into her arms and hold him like the baby he hadn't been for years now, despite all of her fatigue.
The only things stopping her were the empty thermos in one hand and the bag of various papers and supplies from her day in the other. Both of which found themselves haphazardly discarded before her son was halfway down the entry hall.

Upon impact Brennen said 'hello' in what Ruby considered the best way possible: trying his best to crush as much love into her as possible. "Heyyyyy, there's my big man!" she said as the heat of his body began to fill her cloak against the chilling cold from outside. Kicking the door closed behind her, Ruby returned the welcome hug with one of her own. "Did you have a good day, buddy?"

He hesitated for a second too long for the answer to be 'yes' before breaking the hug and giving a dismissive shrug. Ruby practically felt whiplash at his sharp change in mood, she narrowed her eyes in challenge at the early onset of 'don't wanna talk about it' that was developing her baby.

Kneeling down to his level, Ruby dug deep into her memories of how her dad had handled situations like this, and her own previous experiences as a parent. She put a hand on his shoulder, subconsciously willing as much support through that small physical connection as she could. She hadn't expected to go full mom-mode this soon after getting home, but that didn't mean her son didn't need her to. "Do you want me to ask? Or give you some space?" It wasn't a perfect system, asking like this. Ruby had learned that the hard way with Jade more times than she would have liked. But mistakes like bottling up the wrong things were part of growing up, and she had to trust Brennen to make those choices himself. Even if she wanted to shield him from any and all hurt in the world.

"Mm," he mumbled half-heartedly "Kalt was going to come today, but Dad said he got grounded."

The idea of Kalt being grounded at all was foreign to Ruby. Whitley wasn't exactly the disciplinarian his father had been, and Kalt just didn't act up very much in the first place. Blake would have more details than Brennen though, like how he managed to ground a kid who just needed a doorknob in order to go transcontinental.

"Well it can't have been all bad. You had a field trip today too, right? Where'd you go?"

His moping was cut short by a smile Ruby swore could turn the tides of a war. "We got to visit the Amity Coliseum. And they gave a prize to anyone who could answer seven questions right."

"Seven?" Ruby gasped dramatically. She'd taken both Brennen and Jade up the Amity III several times over the years. They'd been young, and she didn't exactly give a guided tour of the service hallways, but the two of them probably remembered more than she gave them credit for those visits. "That sounds like more than Penny could answer. How many did you get?"

Reaching into his pocket, Brennen smiled as he presented a small metal pin of Amity's insignia still inside its clear plastic wrapper. The Twin Axes of Vale were highlighted in copper against the silver of the other three kingdom’s symbolic weapons. "I got this year's early," he said with pride in his voice.

"Very cool," Ruby said with a quick nod of approval. "You got to meet Captain Hadal too I bet."

"Yeah. He has a really bushy beard. Nila got to be the class captain and sit in his big chair while we were in the command center. I was in the logis… log…"

Ruby felt his pain. Hard word or brain-fart, she'd had those days. "C'mon, while you figure it out
let's go and say 'hi' to everybody." She ushered Brennen back towards the sounds of home life deeper into the house while he pondered the mystery word. Ruby didn't want to interrupt the story she had asked him to tell, but she also desperately wanted to fall over on the couch.

Not wanting to just leave him in the lurch though, she put into practice a tried and true teaching skill: open ended, leading questions. "You probably had a scroll or a screen, right? What was on it?"

"I had all these numbers that were.. Umm… how much of everything was in all the rooms. And a map with a bunch of names all moving around."

Ruby… didn't know the name for that job either. She knew what the job was, but the closest name she could think of right now was 'quartermaster,' and that wasn't really a command center position. Weiss would know the answer in her sleep, and Ruby knew right where to find her on a Wednesday night.

Rounding the corner into the formal dining space, Ruby and Brennen were greeted by a scene that was oh-so-familiar and oh-so-welcome.

"—seduce the Nevermore," Mercury said with confidence oozing from his every word. Well at least the 'familiar' part.

Emerald, wearing some kind of long white robe that Ruby assumed was part of her character, sat behind a cardboard screen and rolled her eyes (and her dice) with a heavy sigh. "Merc, I swear on your dad's left testicle if you somehow manage another crit tonight, I'm going to start checking your dice."

"You know you want to hear me RP some hot Grimm-on-Bard action. Don't deny Hozpoz his feathery conquest!"

"As long as you don't expect me to visualize it as you go." Emerald vaguely gestured to a section of the table empty of anything Ruby could see. Judging from the experience though, she was using her semblance in that spot to give a bit more life to her Game Master-ing. "I'll admit I want to see where this harem strategy is leading."

"Weiss, how many spell slots do you have left?" Jaune was mostly ignoring the exchange between Em and Merc, but more importantly was now distracting Weiss just enough for Ruby to enact a plan.

Seizing the opportunity in front of her, Ruby motioned for Brennen to be quiet while she slid behind the two of them as quietly as she could. She took special note of the sweater Weiss was wearing in the otherwise warm home. A turtleneck Weiss meant Weiss wanted to hide something on her neck. Whether it was evidence of fun that had already been had, or a promise of fun planned for tonight wasn't wholly clear. Ruby felt a flood of love warmth towards Weiss either way.

Wasting no more time with trying to nail down the future, Ruby swiftly plopped her chin on top of Weiss' shoulder and wrapped her in a surprise hug. Cold hands worming their way below Weiss' sweater, over the straps and cords that criss-crossed the pristine white skin, and expertly targeting her vulnerable midriff.

"Ruby!" Weiss shrieked in surprise at the public invasion of personal space and shock of frigid digits making contact.

Cackling as the table turned to the two of them, Ruby did her best to look sorrowful and
extracted her hands from the haven of warmth, settling them across Weiss' shoulders and feeling what had to be a harness beneath the thick fabric. Definitely a 'to-be' night of fun then; Ruby could feel metal hooks and buckles now that she knew what she was looking for. "But nerd bellies are the perfect temperature for reheating cold hands."

"Welcome home." Weiss turned to give Ruby a quick kiss hello, elevating her energy levels from 'nearly dead' to 'Salem is a bitch-ass motherfucker' in less than a second. "Emerald invited us all to her Circle this Saturday for Hallows, how's your schedule look?"

Ruby looked across at Emerald, connecting the dots between her outfit and the newly shared information from Weiss after just long enough to feel dumb for not realizing sooner. "Oh, Hallows! I'm sorry, Em, it always slips my mind that you celebrate. Is that why you're all?…" Ruby gestured at the robes, not wanting to reveal that she really didn't know much of anything about the holiday. It hadn't exactly been important to her until it became important to her friend.

"Mhm," Emerald nodded, thankfully saving Ruby from the embarrassment of not remembering what Hallows actually was. "I'm the Arch for my Circle this year. And… I know it's not really a thing for you all, so don't feel like you have to come. It's pretty much just going to be reciting scripture, and some songs."

"Guise Hagen also does an amazing job on the sermon every year," Mercury said casually as he fiddled with his dice, causing everyone but Emerald to stare at him in surprise. Looking up, he noticed the attention and shrugged. "What? Brindle liked it when we went to Circle together. Got a lot of good memories there with Em and her. I'm sure you've all ended up at weirder place for your kids." Mercury's question caused Ruby to glance at both Jade and Brennen, and brought up a slew of memories for each.

Yang and a much younger Jade returning home from their first mother-daughter weekend at a local campground smelling like wood fire and covered in bug bites.

Weiss staying up late to learn how to build a model ship they were giving to Brennen the next morning for his birthday.

The feeling of utterly-confused-parent-ness Ruby felt while escorting Brennen to a fan convention he'd been completely obsessed with for the last year.

Ruby couldn't help but agree with Mercury, their kids had led them to all sorts of unexpected places, but she couldn't just tell him he was right. Is she did he'd be insufferable to talk to for the next week. Luckily she had a downright artful dodge available to her. "Of course I'll be there, Em. Now if you'll excuse me, I need some food. Oscar's starting to look like a turkey leg—hey!"

"Sorry," Emerald said, not sorry at all. She didn't even try to hide the high-five with Jade afterwards.

Ever coming to the rescue, Weiss gave Ruby's hand a squeeze, drawing her attention. "We ordered out, but there's plenty of leftovers in the fridge."

Ruby was already up and in the kitchen before she really knew what was happening. "Did Yang get any of those spicy pancake things?" she asked absentmindedly as she rummaged through the various Tupperware. Some part of her knew that there was no one who could hear the question, but her tired mind didn't feel like fighting the comfortable habit right now.

Eventually settling on some kind of stuffed bun hidden beneath a sealed plastic bag of buttered noodles and behind some brand of fancy cheese she didn't recognize. A quick round in the toaster
oven was all it needed before Ruby was on her way, dinner in-hand.

She considered rejoining Weiss, Jade, and Brennen and watching the wayward adventurers while she ate, but decided against it when she heard the sound of Emerald declaring 'roll initiative' around the corner. Playing the game was plenty fun, but observing combat without participating was too many numbers for her brain right now.

She passed by the formal dining space's entryway and continued on towards the living room. She had hoped to find Blake reading, or Yang watching something on the Interlink, but no such luck was had. Instead, as she rounded the couch, a familiar furball was there to greet her with a wagging tail.

"Hey there, Quinten," She said to the smallest, furriest member of her family. "D'anybody feed you yet?"

Noticing one of the true owners of the couch was now present, Quinten rose to a sitting position and made a play for a face-lick hello—or a bite of her dinner. He'd have to be quicker (and taller) to get one by Ruby Rose, though. She gave him a scratch behind the ears for trying before shooing him off the couch. "Alright fuzzbutt, Scooch! You’ve got food in your bowl, and I've got a hot date with this bun thing and some minor brain death."

"Mmm. Buns and brain death," Blake said from the (relative) shadowy hallway causing Ruby to halt her attempted collapse into the welcoming couch with a haphazardly placed knee. "Sounds like you've got your whole night filled to bursting, then."

Turning towards the sound of her wife's voice, Ruby wagged her eyebrows in mock seduction. "Care to help me add a few more?"

Blake stepped out from the 'shadows', wearing a baggy long-sleeve that she liked after a workout, a face that screamed 'cuddle me, I am Blake,' and a bemused smirk. "A few more what? Brain deaths?"

Reaching her arms out towards Blake, Ruby grasped the air like a baby asking to be picked up. "Nooo! I need my Blake buns."

"Between you and your sister…” Blake pretended to be annoyed as she walked towards the couch and Ruby. "I hope our grandchildren don't have to see a statue of butts in front of Beacon one day."

Wrapping her arm around Blake's waist, Ruby sent the two of them collapsing onto a heap and eliciting a pair of squeaks as they landed. "But Butts, Blake! But butts!" She giggled as Blake smiled back at her dumb joke.

"Well, you had better remember to workout that rubooty tonight. It's leg day and I don't count whatever Weiss has planned for you tonight as fitness. " Now it was Ruby’s turn to laugh, and plant a peck on the back of Blake’s hand held in her own.

The two of them adjusted into a more comfortable position, Ruby snuggling into the small spoon so she would still be able to eat without getting crumbs everywhere. Blake flipped through the channels to find something to veg out to.

Somewhere between the prime time sitcoms and a marathon of Spruce Willis movies, the couch snuggles were interrupted by a three-way harmony of battle cries.

"Grimm Attack!" Yang shouted, giving Ruby just enough time to prepare for the impact before
three bodies crushed Ruby and Blake deeper into the couch.

Ruby had a fleeting desire to feel annoyed, but the sight of Jade laughing along with her brother sent that desire to bed without any dinner just in time for Blake to disappear from behind Ruby and another impact to crush her even further into the pillowy cushions.

By the time she could breathe again Ruby found that the family pile (sans one Weiss) had already wriggled, rolled and crawled into a much more comfortable configuration. One that accounted for jabbing hip bones and all the normal discomforts that came with stacking bodies. Though she was still on the bottom, her pleas for mercy were tactfully rebutted by whoever was sitting directly on her stomach by way of adding as much extra weight as possible and a totally innocuous wiggle.

But Ruby would not be silenced so easily. She had a daring plan, one which was saved for just such emergencies and threatened to divide the world as to the ethics of its use. Armies had trembled at the mere mention of this plan. Kingdoms had gone to war because of it. Empires had fallen and cars turned around.

But it was a risk Ruby was willing to take in order to win.

Mustering her will, Ruby managed to free her face from the mass of hair that robbed her of clarity and let out one last desperate plea. "Weiss, help!" was all she managed before the attack began anew, and Ruby was smothered beneath the tides of war again.

And this ended the tale of Ruby Rose.

She was never heard from agai—

"Moom. Stop narrating your death already." Jade interrupted flatly.

"Yeah, Rubes. It's a teensy bit hard to take your heroic end seriously when you're still changing the channels when you do it."

"Well excuse me for not wanting to die with a musical on. Besides, there’s supposed to be a thing about the Tournament Brackets soon. I’m not missing that for anything."

"Not even if I said to meet me in the basement in twenty minutes?" Weiss countered from… somewhere Ruby couldn't see from her position.

"I'm totally missing it," Ruby said without hesitation. "Yang. Dearest big sis."

"Yes, oh sweet baby sister of mine?"

"Can you fulfil a dying Huntress's final wish and hang a sock on the door when you go out tonight?"

There was a bark of laughter, followed immediately by all the weight that had been crushing Ruby suddenly lifting away. "Thought you’d never ask." Ruby looked up to see Yang effortlessly holding Blake and both kids under her arms. "Go get ‘er. I’m sure there’s something we can fill a night with."

Not even bothering to pretend that she needed to sit up, Ruby exploded off the couch as fast as the layout of the house allowed and left a trail of petals that led directly into the master bathroom. In a literal whirlwind of activity, clothes were shed, towels procured, soaps checked, and nail clippers found.
Just before she turned the shower on, Ruby heard a three-way chant of “Ice! Cream! Ice! Cream!” from the living room that she Ruby could have sworn was harvested from unicorn poop and gummy bears, for how utterly, tooth-rottingly sweet the sound of it was.

Ruby added her own voice to it as best she could through the hiss of running water as she felt the warmth of love wash over her like the hot water she stood beneath.

Chapter End Notes

YEET

That is all.

Thanks as always to WhatOtherPlanet, MellowYelloww, and Shock Factor (with special thanks to the entire FFC, FriendofYggdrasil and Junior now too!)

Pls gib Backwash feedback.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!