

To Cinder, Beacon Academy felt less like a school and more like a fortress built to watch the horizon for incoming threats. From a distance, it had risen out of the cliffs above the city of Vale like a spear of pale stone and steel, cleaving apart the heavens. Up close, her eyes took notice of clear design choices that maximised sight lines and defensive fortifications.

To the untrained eye, it was merely a symbol, a remnant of the old world. The towering spires might remind one of a cathedral, a place of worship. But the wide stone pathways and courtyards, the tight corners and alcoves, and hidden murder holes spoke of something else. It spoke of conflict, and war – a never ending battle against the Grimm, and all those who would challenge Beacon's might.

As expected of Ozpin's stronghold. A man did not reach his heights by being unprepared. No simple man could stand against her Queen, and so while Emerald and Mercury gazed around in muted awe, taken in by the pretty gardens and elaborate arches while trying to remain aloof, Cinder only saw angles of attack.

If they were discovered, it would be very difficult to defend against an ambush here.

They moved with the rest of the Haven delegation, dressed to match their peers. She wore a sharp black jacket with a light gray outline around the edges, a white undershirt and a gray and black checkered skirt. A few of the other Haven students shot them curious looks, no doubt wondering who they were, never having seen them before, but did not question their presence. The teachers had been instructed by Lionheart, and given a fabricated story that convinced them of their place.

They were his elite pupils, solely under his tutelage. It was more than enough to cover their inclusion, as Leonardo Lionheart's reputation was without reproach.

If only they knew.

They were led down the main avenue beneath the sweeping arches, and then towards a large building. The students of Atlas and Beacon Academy were already gathered inside the amphitheater, and they took their place beside them, lining up neatly. A few minutes later, Shade joined them.

As they waited, Cinder scanned the gathered students.

Her eyes first settled on an important piece of their plans, a young girl with short ginger hair and freckled cheeks. Though not a young girl in truth, she was an artificial life, an abhorrent creation of man pretending to be human.

Penny Polendina.

She stood amongst the Atlas students as if she belonged, bouncing up and down in excitement. The girl by her side was military trained, stiff backed and keeping watch over her charge with sharp eyes. Cinder observed Penny critically, and was amazed despite herself. Even knowing the truth, she could see no faults. Her eyes told her that she was a real girl, her posture a little rigid but not unusual when compared to the other Atlesian students standing by her side. It could easily speak of discipline rather than anything unnatural.

But in reality, she was nothing more than a toy. A tool. A weapon of war. Designed to blend in with the population. The perfect infiltration unit.

Her lips twisted, amused.

An impressive feat of technology, to be sure. Commendable – doubly so because it drove Arthur Watts insane, to see his rival prosper while he had been forced to bear the indignity of being blacklisted.

Anything that ruffled that man's feathers was something worthy of respect.

Her eyes then shifted towards the Beacon students.

Team RWBY was easy to spot. Not just because of their unique appearance, but they were causing a little bit of a commotion. Their antics were drawing attention, Ruby Rose and Weiss Schnee going back and forth while Yang Xiao Long egged them on. The formation of their team cannot have been happenstance. There were too many threads there, connecting too many prominent people.

Ozpin's doing, no doubt.

And perhaps the most interesting of all was the one not so easily picked out.

Ruby Rose.

The name meant nothing. It was her eyes that intrigued her.

Salem had made comment once, and it was something Cinder made sure to remember. It was rare that her Queen showed anything beyond cool detachment. Only when she spoke of Ozpin did her voice fill with emotion, tightened by a deep seated loathing that could fill even the most courageous hearts with dread.

But there had been another time when Cinder had bore witness to her Queen's rage. It had been only for a moment, her features hardening in disgust as her voice scorched, delivering a warning most unexpected.

"Beware those with silver eyes."

Nothing more, nothing less.

A breadcrumb, but one Cinder took seriously. Salem was not one to dole out unnecessary warnings.

But to look at her, Ruby Rose did not appear particularly threatening or impressive. A young, naive girl – foolish, impulsive, yet she had already foiled two of their operations. Not without skill, but not someone that warranted a warning.

Yet still, she would be watched closely. Her – and her entire team. If for nothing else than the connections they laid claim to.

And then there was *her*.

Cinder found Pyrrha Nikos, and *watched*.

She stood as a warrior should, self-assured, strong. Shoulders back, head high, she weathered the envious looks of her classmates and those from abroad, those that recognized her from the countless billboards and commercials that took advantage of her likeness to peddle their products.

Cinder had studied her thoroughly. Not just the information packet they had received, but all of her televised matches. They were easy to find online, and it had become quickly apparent that her moniker as the Invincible Girl had been well earned.

If there was one student among those gathered that could give her genuine trouble, it was her.

No.

That wasn't quite right, was it?

Cinder's eyes slid to the left, and found *him*.

The messy blond hair was as expected, as was his height. Even slouching, he stood taller than his partner, his shoulders broad even though he seemed like he was attempting to minimize the space he inhabited. Ordinarily, she'd have dismissed him at a glance. Everything about the way he stood spoke of *weakness*. Forgettable. Nobody.

But she knew better.

It was clearly by *design*.

Cinder felt her jaw tighten as she observed him. It galled her to admit it, but without Watt's information, she'd have been *fooled* by such a simple display. She'd have overlooked a threat to her plans, and would have been caught completely unaware when he sprung his own.

Whatever that plan may be.

His position as Pyrrha Nikos' partner cannot have been a coincidence. Just as Ozpin had clearly formed Team RWBY, Jaune Arc had positioned himself in an advantageous position. Whatever it was that he was after, it likely involved the star fighter.

*Reveal your secrets to me*, she thought, drilling a hole through the side of his head with her eyes. *Show me what you have planned*.

Cinder tensed as his head turned, and blue eyes met her own.

For a moment, her heart seized in her chest. Completely taken aback, she could not even avert her eyes. He stared at her, and she stared back – openly, *foolishly*. A rare mistake.

And then he looked away.

*What was that?*

Had he felt her observing him? Had she just revealed her hand, right from the onset? He had looked at her without a hint of surprise, simply returning the courtesy, letting her know that he knew she was watching him.

"Ma'am?" Emerald questioned quietly, leaning in. "Are you okay?"

If only for a moment, it had felt as if a hand had gripped her heart.

Jaune Arc – or whoever he was – *was dangerous*.

She felt a burst of anger erupt within, and with it, the powers she had stolen simmered beneath the surface. If this Jaune Arc was after what rightfully belonged to her...

Cinder exhaled heavily through her nose in a controlled burst, feeling her rage cool.

Now was not the moment to make hasty decisions. She was in control of her destiny.

"I am fine," she replied shortly, forcing her eyes away from him.

If Pyrrha Nikos had the talent to match Cinder's own, then the woman that now walked across the stage had just as much ability to disrupt her plans. It was not the first time she had laid her eyes upon Glynda Goodwitch. Last time, they had been locked in battle – though the woman did not know it. The power and skill Ozpin's second-in-command had displayed that day revealed to Cinder just how troublesome she could become in the future, if she wasn't careful.

Any chatter died as soon as she spoke.

"Welcome to Beacon Academy," green eyes scanned the gathered students calmly, her voice firm but open. "Please welcome the Headmaster of Beacon, Ozpin."

Polite applause erupted as Cinder caught sight of Salem's most hated foe, and their greatest enemy. He walked across the stage, his cane tapping against the floor every other step. There was a sudden tension in the air, a presence felt as the man who was regarded as the strongest Huntsman on the planet took his place in front of them.

"Thank you, Professor Goodwitch," he said, inclining his head towards his fellow faculty member. She stepped back, giving him total control.

His speech was short, but Cinder paid little attention to it. She instead focused on watching his movements, the way he stood, and saw that this was a man with no openings. He may have appeared relaxed, open – but what she saw was a wall, one not easily scaled.

A worthy challenge.

Once the assembly was over, the visiting schools were given over to the team-leader of one of Beacon's first year teams. At first, it appeared that Ruby Rose would be the one to escort the Haven delegation, but Cinder watched with narrow eyes as Jaune Arc approached her and whispered something in her ear.

Whatever was said was enough, and Ruby nodded and moved towards the group from Atlas. Cinder tensed, wary.

What was he up to?

"Hello," he greeted, and his voice was not what she expected. Open, friendly – youthful, even. That wasn't so unexpected. It was just that Cinder couldn't detect any hidden sides to it. It

sounded natural. “My name is Jaune. Jaune Arc. I’m the leader of Team JNPR and I’ll be showing you to your dormitory.”

“Hey man,” someone suddenly spoke up, and a familiar face stepped forward. “What’s up?”

The Beacon students weren’t the only ones that Cinder had information on. She’d come prepared, and knew the faces and names of all those attending for the Vytal Festival. Especially those hailing from the school she was claiming as her own.

Sun Wukong – a skilled, but ultimately unimportant piece. A wildcard, though. He’d arrived in Vale much earlier than the rest of the Haven students, and had been involved in Roman’s failed heist at the docks.

Worthy of watching only because of his connection to Blake Belladonna, and Team RWBY.

Cinder frowned.

Though perhaps he required a closer eye. She watched as Jaune Arc raised a hand, and they high-fived one another as if they were close friends.

Jaune Arc moved quickly. He’d already made connections within Haven.

“If you’ll just follow me,” he called out, leading them towards the doors.

Cinder watched him closely as the students of Haven followed his instructions. The dormitory wasn't far from the amphitheater, and within minutes, they were in front of a large red brick building. There were a half dozen matching buildings, and she saw the other schools being led over. Shade would be occupying the one next to theirs, while Atlas was entering the one further down.

They'd have an entire building to themselves.

"The rooms have already been assigned," Jaune said as they gathered in the lobby. "When I call your team name, come forward and claim your card. It'll have a code to set on your scroll, giving you access to your room and all of Beacon's different services."

He started listing off names from a sheet of paper, and they would approach, receiving their cards. It was smooth sailing until it came to them, his eyes settling on Cinder and making the hair on the back of her neck rise.

He'd left them for last. She doubted that it had been accidental.

Jaune blinked, peering around in confusion – or so he made it appear. Emerald frowned, glaring.

"What's the hold up?" she asked.

"Are there only three of you?" he checked his sheet of paper. "It says you have four members."

Cinder kept her cool, answering smoothly. "Our teammate is currently dealing with a family emergency. She'll join us soon."

“Oh. I hope it isn’t anything too serious,” he replied, sympathetically. If Cinder didn’t know better, she’d have thought it was genuine. “Give her my well wishes, won’t you?”

Emerald scoffed. “Whatever. Just give us our card.”

Cinder clamped down on the impulse to chastise her.

“Here you are,” he handed it over, Emerald snatching it rudely. He didn’t even blink, and instead said, “Let me show you to your room.”

“That isn’t necessary,” Cinder said, keeping her tone light. “I’m sure we can find our way.”

“It’s no trouble. I insist.”

Mercury shifted by her side, and Cinder could feel the sudden unease rolling off him. Jaune Arc hadn’t offered to show any of the other teams to their rooms. Not even Team SSSN, whose leader he clearly knew.

It was basically a declaration.

Emerald caught it, as well. Her expression became stiff, her eyes narrowing.

“Then lead the way,” Cinder said, on guard.

Jaune led them up the stairs, and down the hall. Mercury moved into position, a step behind on his right. Emerald moved to the opposite side, ready to meet his eyes at a moment's notice and ensnare him in an illusion should he try anything.

Cinder felt fire rush through her veins, prepared.

His skills were unknown. She wasn't taking any chances.

“What do you think of Beacon so far?” Jaune asked casually, attempting to strike up a conversation. He glanced back over his right shoulder, eyes landing on Mercury. If he noticed that they'd switched positions, he didn't show it. “Is it your first time in Vale?”

“It seems pretty cool,” Mercury answered. “And yeah, it's my first time here. I've never been to Vale before. Spent all my life in Mistral. What about you? Are you a local?”

He was fishing, just as he'd been taught.

“Nah. I'm from the sticks. Country boy, born and bred.”

A non-answer, an easy deflection. Not that Cinder expected for Mercury to catch anything, but it only reinforced what they already knew. Jaune Arc was like them. Vague answers, half-truths – they were the best lies.

They arrived at their room, and after inputting the code in their scrolls, Emerald unlocked their door by swiping it by the lock. It clicked, and Mercury pushed it open.

The room was of average size for a space designed to house four people. There were four beds, a dresser, and the open door on the left revealed a bathroom complete with a shower, sink, toilet and bath.

Cinder scanned the area quickly. The curtains were open, giving a sniper clear line of sight should they require it. Emerald entered first, masking her wary movements as excitement, rushing towards one of the beds and flopping down. Reaching over, she pulled the curtains closed.

"It isn't much, but the beds are pretty comfy," Jaune smiled, apparently amused by Emerald's antics. "Any luggage you brought with you, your teachers will deliver sometime this evening. The dining hall is open at all hours, so if you get hungry, don't be shy."

"Don't have to tell me twice," Mercury smirked.

Emerald rolled her eyes.

"Thank you for showing us the way," Cinder said, returning her gaze to Jaune. "You've been very helpful."

"If you need anything, *anything* at all, you can come to me," he said, and the emphasis put her on edge. Their eyes met, and all Cinder saw was *confidence*. "For anything. I mean it."

He knew.

It was impossible. They'd been so careful, and yet *he knew*.

Maybe not the specifics. Even Emerald and Mercury didn't know everything, and that was information only privy to her, but Jaune Arc knew they were more than they seemed. All it had taken was a lingering glance, and a short conversation, and he'd somehow pinned them.

Just who the hell were they dealing with here?

Cinder kept her face carefully blank, but it was difficult. Her voice, however, carried a hint of fire as she said, "I'll keep that mind."

Even knowing, he showed zero fear. Even without knowing the scope of Cinder's abilities, isolating himself with the three of them without hesitation spoke to a level of belief in his own that was cause for concern. Even outnumbered, he was completely calm.

"Great. Maybe we can catch up sometime, after you've settled. I can introduce you to my team. They're really cool, you'll love them. Oh, and my other friends – they're great people, it'd be awesome if we could all be friends."

It felt like an offer. Cinder wasn't sure, but she suspected that he was extending an olive branch. To anyone else, it would just appear like he was trying to become friends with some foreign students. Underneath that, there was the true meaning.

Our goals don't need to conflict.

She wasn't used to being the one on the back foot. Not since her days as a helpless, pathetic child at the mercy of her horrid step-family. Salem didn't count, for she was a force of nature, a being of nightmare given manifest. Jaune Arc was just a man – but a dangerous one, who knew how to play the game.

He had her at a disadvantage.

It galled her.

But she could do nothing about it. At least, not yet. Cinder needed to be patient. She needed to be careful.

The best way forward was to play it safe. Until she had more information. Until she knew exactly who she was dealing with, and how to defeat him – or, though she was loath to think it, bring him over to her cause.

Having someone so skilled on her side had benefits. Salem was always looking for talented individuals.

Cinder nodded, and smiled. A fake smile, her mouth concealing venom.

"That sounds wonderful," she said brightly. "We should exchange contact information."

His eyes lit up. "Yeah, sure – uh, here," he pulled out his scroll, and held it out. Cinder pulled out her own scroll, the one she was using here at Beacon. A burner with no incriminating evidence, and no true link to her beyond being in her possession. She placed it side-by-side with his, and after a second, there was a ding on their devices. Cinder hit accept.

"I'll call you," she said.

"Great. Oh, uh – this is awkward. We never introduced ourselves properly," he held out his hand. "My name is Jaune Arc. Pleased to meet you."

Cinder eyed his hand for a moment before taking it, taking note of the strength of his grip. "Cinder Fall. A pleasure."

"Mercury Black," the silver haired assassin called out, having claimed his own bed.

Emerald eyed the way they held hands, her brow twitching. "Emerald Sustrai."

Cinder watched as he left, keeping her eyes on him until his back vanished at the end of the hall. She then signalled to the both of them, gesturing for them to follow. They obeyed without question, and quickly finding the fire escape, made their way to the roof.

"Do not speak a word of our plans while inside that room until it has been swept for bugs," she said immediately, voice sharp but controlled. "Treat every room as if it has ears."

"What was with that guy?" Mercury asked. "That just happened, didn't it? I'm not imagining it?"

"Oh, it happened, dear Mercury," Cinder began pacing. "Our suspicions have been confirmed."

“How did he make us?” Emerald asked, shocked. “Did someone tip him off?”

It was unlikely, but not impossible. Cinder was new to Vale, and the connections she had forged had been through fear, not cultivated by time and familiarity. Roman – and thus, Neo – followed her because they were frightened of her. The White Fang and Adam Taurus were the same, though a little more incitement had been needed to truly place them beneath her thumb.

For all she knew, this Jaune Arc had vast connections built up over months, or even years. Someone may have talked.

She latched onto that theory, the more she thought about it. It made much more sense than a simple lingering glance giving up the game. Why hadn’t she thought of that sooner? Cinder frowned, giving her head a quick shake.

He had her rattled. She’d been rattled ever since Watt’s incomplete information packet had graced her table.

She needed to get her head back in the game.

“Perhaps Roman needs a reminder of what will happen should he betray me,” she said darkly. “Just to make sure. As do the White Fang,” her lips pursed, mind racing. “Contact Neo. Her presence will be required here at Beacon *much* sooner than planned.”

Emerald grimaced.

“What do we tell her?”

“Nothing. We call, and she will come. She does not need to know why,” Cinder pinned her with an intense look. “But if she requires any extra motivation, let me know.”

Emerald nodded, unable to meet her eyes. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll handle Adam Taurus myself,” she continued. “Meanwhile, a close eye must be kept on Jaune Arc whenever possible. I want to know who he associates with, what his prior history is here at Beacon before we arrived, and a complete breakdown of his fighting capabilities.”

“I can do that,” Mercury volunteered, smirking. “You were already going to have me test his partner, right? Well, I might as well handle both of them.”

Cinder inclined her head. “Excellent. Though need I remind you that he knows we aren’t what we seem, so he will be on guard at all times. A simple spar will not be enough to judge what he is capable of.”

“I can think of a thing or two to get him to open up a little,” whatever he had planned, he kept it to himself. “And if not, I can always get a good gauge from his classmates. I’ve got it.”

He was surprisingly eager. Did she sense a hint of competition? That was almost... *cute*.

So long as he got the job done, Cinder didn’t care how. So long as he didn’t make things more difficult for them going forward.

When they returned to the room, they searched it, top to bottom. Nothing was left untouched, going so far as to unscrew all the lightbulbs, and even check inside the cistern of the toilet. Cinder then used her personal scroll to scan every surface with a custom built transmitter, courtesy of that big headed jackass Watts.

As much as she despised the man, he knew his stuff. Even if he would like nothing better than for her to fail, he would never sabotage an operation sanctioned by their Queen.

They found nothing.

“Every day, we will check,” she said, and they did not complain. “We will not fail because we were careless.”

Any time they left their room unattended was an opportunity for Ozpin, Ironwood – or Jaune Arc – to place a listening device. To catch them in the act, and blow their whole operation, and jail time was only the best case scenario, one that would never be afforded to her who held half a Maiden’s power – or as blackmail.

Dinner was a time for her to observe him in his natural habitat.

The dining hall was packed with students from all four schools, the room overflowing. Despite this, the staff provided ample food, and once they filled their plates, they managed to secure themselves a table. All it took was for Cinder to shoot the group of four boys occupying it previously a sultry smile, and putting on a suggestive tone of voice, asked, “May we sit here?”

They were more than happy to make way for them, and it gave them the perfect view of Team RWBY and JNPR.

“They look like they’re having fun,” Emerald deadpanned, picking at her pasta. Gathering a healthy forkful, she popped it into her mouth and paused, eyes widening slightly. “Huh – this is actually pretty good.”

Mercury had chosen the fried chicken legs, and tore into them happily, grunting his agreement. Emerald shot him a disgusted look as some of the crumbs fell near her bowl, pulling it away in annoyance.

“Do you have to eat like such a slob?” she snapped.

He didn’t answer, too busy with his food. Cinder didn’t even bother paying attention to them, instead focusing on Jaune Arc.

He was currently in conversation with the Schnee heiress. Whatever he was saying, she apparently didn’t care for it, the girl rolling her eyes and looking away in boredom. That didn’t dissuade him, though. He continued talking, his gestures growing more exaggerated, until finally she faced him and said something that made the rest of their teams laugh.

Normally, they’d be close enough to hear what was being said but the noise being generated by hundreds of teenagers packed into a single location was practically deafening. It was hard enough hearing what the people were saying at your own table, let alone across the room, at least with any sort of accuracy.

She was intrigued by their dynamic, though. The Schnee stared daggers through him, not a friendly look at all. In fact, she seemed genuinely annoyed. Yet Jaune Arc continued to speak to her, oblivious – or so he would have everyone believe.

Pyrrha Nikos chose that moment to lean in and say something, drawing his attention. Weiss Schnee appeared relieved, though Cinder saw the struggle play out on her face, wanting to speak with the red head.

Food for thought.

The Invincible Girl was the complete opposite of the Schnee heiress, speaking with him happily, even going so far as to place a hand on his shoulder. She met him as an equal, and as they chatted, Cinder saw the easing of her shoulders, the commanding presence giving way to that of a young woman enjoying the company of a friend.

That aura she carried earlier vanished, as if it never existed. Replaced by an ordinary girl.

Interesting.

He'd clearly made a connection with her. As they were partners, it was expected. They saw a kind face, a boyish smile, awkward confidence.

Cinder saw him pulling their strings.

Why he would want Weiss Schnee disgruntled with him, she didn't know. But there was clearly a reason.

*What are you doing here?* Cinder picked at her fish, and found it satisfying, cooked to perfection. Emerald wasn't alone in her surprise, the flesh flaking apart in her mouth. *What are you after?*

Whatever his secrets were, she *would* discover them.