

# Confluence

## 1

The two guests arrived at the palace without any formal reception. They looked slightly disheveled and wore plain clothing. Cinder shadowed Ember as she jumped the taller man and squeezed him tight. "Laurel!" she shouted, giggling as he twirled her around. "You're here," she added when he let her down, her eyes wide.

He laughed. "Yeah, I'm here. You look so much bigger, Emmy."

Cinder saw Ember's smile deflate. It was hardly perceptible, but she knew. "It's been a while," she said. She turned to her cousin's companion, a grumpy looking woman with silver rimmed glasses. "You must be Olga."

Olga's frown hardly wavered. Along with her fully tattooed arms, that gave her somewhat of a tough look. It'd be tougher if she wasn't so scrawny. "Yes," she said plainly, stretching a hand out.

Though the corner of Ember's mouth twitched, she accepted the handshake. Olga immediately averted her eyes, uninterested. Laurel shot Ember a sympathetic look as she scruffed up her nose. "This is Cinder, my knight. You'll be seeing her some," Ember said to him.

Cinder bowed in his direction slightly. Admittedly, it was out of habit. He lifted his hands and waved it off with a smile. "Don't bow at me. I'm not a Greyland anymore."

"Come, I'll show you your room," Ember said, turning around with a twirl of her skirt. Seeing her in frills made Cinder smile somehow. They made their way through the hallways of the Ashen Palace with ease. Out of the corner of her eye, Cinder caught Laurel looking around with childlike wonder, but didn't say anything. Ember halted in front of a door and

gave Laurel the keys. "Be at the dining hall at seven. You know which one," she said, adding in a blink.

"My wife's invited, right?" he asked, taking a step closer to Olga, whose face hadn't changed at all.

"Of course. This is not only a family reunion, but a discussion of public affairs. She has some involvement," Ember's voice lowered in tone. "I'm sure you may have guessed so."

"How hospitable," Olga mumbled, grimacing. Ember's smile faltered and Cinder's guts dropped because of it.

"We'll be there. Thanks, Emmy," Laurel said in a cheerful tone, guiding Olga into the room with a hand on her shoulder.

Ember and Cinder made the way back to the plaza side by side. Just by the noise of her footsteps, Cinder could tell that the Princess' mood had been fouled somewhat. "You don't like his wife," she pointed out, paying close attention to Ember's face.

"I haven't talked to her enough," Ember said, though her eyes were smoldering. She clicked her tongue. "We'll see."

"Mm. She has bad rep." Cinder looked around, perceiving the wooden arches of the palace in a whole new light. "I wonder if he regrets it."

Ember got closer to her and lowered her voice. "Laurel seldom has a thought in his head. He's completely enthralled by her."

"Wow, Em. Misogyny from you," Cinder said, forcing a disapproving look upon her.

"Not like that. I'm not calling her a witch. But she is one, by literal definition. So that would be *fine*." She'd turned red; as Cinder's smile grew, she bumped into her and sent her off her path. "You're distorting my words, you heathen."

Cinder laughed and rubbed her shoulder, appreciating the soreness of the spot Ember had bumped into. "I just meant that he looks at this place like he's really fond of it."

"I'd regret it. Sooner or later, he will," Ember said. "But it'll be too late."

When night fell, the dining room was somehow darker at its corners, like its shadows had deepened. In turn, the lighthearted conversation between the Greyland family — and adjacents — soon turned serious. Cinder just looked on from a corner, perfectly still in her ceremonial cloth armor.

"Laurel, you must have imagined we made you travel all this way for a reason," Ember's father — well, the King — started, setting his wine glass aside. Cinder could see the Princess grit her teeth. "We've received something of an ultimatum from the Lunar Bay."

Sitting closer to the darkness, Laurel and Olga both went paler. Her face turned into a scowl and she gripped her water glass. Meanwhile, Laurel's smile simply dropped. "Pertaining to me?" he asked, his voice softer. "If that's the case, I'll do what I can. I don't mean to trouble my home country."

"I'm afraid it's more complicated than that. They want Olga deported," the King said. Both he and his daughter looked at Laurel with a neutral expression, though they had their muscles visibly tense.

Laurel put his hand over Olga's, easing her grip on the glass even if his expression had turned graver. "Why now? It's been years."

"It seems they want any diplomatic excuse to violate our borders," Ember piped up in her forced soft tone, "They need access to the mountain pass."

"Look. You know I'd do anything to keep the Ashen sovereignty intact. But I won't give Olga up. If she goes back, she'll be tried for treason." Laurel was inching closer to her, as if someone would try to snatch her away. Olga remained undisturbed, her scowl still on.

"We should hear Olga's opinion on this," Ember said, turning a faint smile to her. "It relates more to her life than anything."

"I can never go home," she said, her voice raspy. "I won't pretend to have the noble motivation of defending the country that took me in, though I do think giving in to Lunarian demands doesn't help your sovereignty in the slightest." She took a sip of her water, her hand shaking. "I'm simply not willing to go to the noose or spend the rest of my life serving the Lunarian military, even if it avoids conflict between our countries." There was silence for a moment. It was thick and smothering. "Feel free to banish me elsewhere if that will help, though," she added, shrugging.

Her hands were trembling severely. Laurel held one of them tightly, caressing her with his thumb. He bent closer and whispered something in her ear; her scowl subsided and she simply got up and left, muttering a weak "Excuse me" as she did so. Once the door was closed again, Laurel took a good sip of his wine, threw his hair over his shoulders and crossed his arms. "I stand with her on this," he said, his usual smile gone.

Ember was gripping the table's edge tightly. Her father sighed and went back to drinking as well. "We won't force your hand," he said.

"You do understand this could escalate to war, right?" Ember raised her voice, glaring at Laurel.

He emptied his glass. "I take my wedding vows seriously. Come what may, I'll put Olga above it. She's the light of my life." He shrugged. "Maybe someday you'll get it."

"We're your family! She's a war criminal!" Ember pleaded, throwing her arms up.

"She's a war *refugee*." Laurel narrowed his eyes at his cousin. Burning shame stung her cheeks.

"Ember, please," the King interrupted, "Let's not throw baseless accusations around."

Laurel took a deep breath and stood up. "I'm sorry. I'll be skipping dessert today. I love you guys. Love you, Emmy. But I can't say what you want to hear." He paused at the door.

"Good night."

Ember's parents bid him good night and let him go like he hadn't been extremely impolite. Cinder had just a smidge of an idea of how close they were.

"What do we do now?" Ember mumbled, twirling her wine glass mindlessly.

"We'll negotiate something, honey. We always do," her mother said.

Cinder had just dropped Ember off at her room when she heard a knock on the door that connected their rooms. When she opened it, Ember was hardly standing, most of her weight thrown against the wall.

"Cindyyyy," she called out, whining a little. "My dress is stuck."

"You can't handle your wine well," Cinder said, sighing. It was a forced sigh; to be honest, the request had made her cheeks heat up. She circled to Ember's back and undid the clasps easily. They hadn't been stuck whatsoever. "There you go."

Ember crossed her arms over her chest to hold the fabric up. "Thank you. Thank you, Cindy." She slumped forward and dropped her head on Cinder's shoulder. Suddenly, all her weight was on Cinder and she had to wrap her arms around her. Her naked back was far too hot. "At least you I can always count on."

"What are you so mooney about now?"

"Laurel was like a brother to me. I guess I just don't know him anymore." She was drooling on Cinder's pajama top a bit.

"When you get married, your spouse becomes your new family," she said, unsure.

Ember nuzzled her with her cheek. "Will you get married and leave me, Cindy?" Her voice quivered.

The question was absurd, and yet Cinder's heart rate doubled. "Go to sleep, Princess. You're not making any sense."

Morning came and so did Ember's sobriety. They found themselves fencing in the training court, dancing in and out of each other's range. However, Ember happened to be stepping more in than out, her focused glare digging into Cinder as much as her practice sword wanted to. Though Cinder was a trained knight, she was more familiar with traditional swordplay, while Greyland customs called for fencing and rapiers; so, their sessions would usually be quite even.

"Hey, Princess," Cinder called, dodging out, "Where's your mind at?"

Ember's glare broke. Her mouth twisted into a snarl. "Laurel's selfish acts," she said, trying to stab Cinder again in the same breath.

Cinder felt a slight smile form on her face. "I think you're jealous."

The intensity of those eyes almost made Cinder regret teasing her. "What have I to be jealous of?" She pointed her sword up; Cinder sidestepped.

"That he has someone he loves enough to prioritize over anything else. I bet that feels good."

Immediately, Ember stepped back and halted, twisting her sword away. That smoldering look was back; worst of all, it was upon Cinder. "When you're born into this place of comfort, your duty is to your people. That's our only responsibility. Compared to national affairs, my personal wants have no standing." She averted her eyes to start removing her gloves. It was relieving to Cinder. "If I have to give up on my happiness, so be it. I guess Laurel didn't get that memo."

"So you're not happy?" Cinder lowered her sword, feeling her heartbeat on her grip.

"Right now, my happiness is... right here, with you. Days we get to spend doing things like this," Ember said. "I'm not complaining. I've had every comfort in return." She took a deep breath and finally looked up with a smile. "Let's go get breakfast, Cindy."

"Yeah." Cinder tried to smile back, but found it a bit hard. She put the equipment away and, when she looked up, found Ember letting her hair loose. It made her hold her breath.

"Gods, you have so much hair. It's not fair."

Ember's face finally lightened up. She giggled. "Why not? I grew it myself."

"Growing mine was much harder."

"You're such a crybaby. Come on, stick your arm out," Ember said, smiling. When Cinder obeyed, she linked their arms and they walked together.

Life turned back to normal pretty much instantaneously. That meant a good amount of work but a bigger amount of time with Ember. Cinder settled back into her carefree routine for about a month; when she'd thought the matter was over and done with, Ember was summoned to a meeting. In itself, that didn't raise any alarms in Cinder's mind — what got her was being stopped at the door by a fellow knight. "Your presence is not requested, Ashling," he said.

Cinder averted her eyes to Ember's, finding her face already turned to her and her lips parted. She'd gone pale under the candlelight, as chill as solid wax. Cinder offered her a reassuring nod and she lifted her head, soon disappearing beyond the door. For an unnecessary knight, what was left was waiting outside with her arms crossed. When Ember came out about an hour later, she had a stern expression and her eyes didn't meet Cinder's. She walked straight away and Cinder hurried to match her heavy steps.

"Princess? Are you alright?" she asked in a whisper.

"Everything's fine," Ember said, raising her face to smile at Cinder. Her eyes were glistening. "Dinner should be ready by now. I heard we'll have your favorite dessert today."

The lie made Cinder's chest tighten up. "Good," she mumbled anyway.

As they ate by themselves, Ember loosened up some. Still, the image of her eyes glistening was stuck in Cinder's mind and she couldn't shake it. When they stopped at the Princess' bedroom door, Cinder's hand lingered on hers — just a light touch. "You seemed down after that meeting," she whispered.

Ember turned her eyes down. "It's alright. I might have to travel. But you'll be there with me, right?"

"Of course."

"So everything's fine." Ember squeezed her hand and turned the door handle. "Good night, Cindy. I love you." There was a hint of the sadness from before in her smile.

"I love you too," Cinder said, unable to find the strength to prod at it further when the words squeezed her heart.

Keeping her eyes on the mirror and a steady grip on the razor, Cinder didn't notice the new presence until it was too late. She turned her face to find Ember knocking on the doorframe with a silly smile. There was nowhere to hide; she recoiled a little within herself. "Princess," she greeted, trying to act nonchalant as she went back to shaving, "I'm not quite out of bed yet." Though it should already be obvious, she reinforced her point by gesturing at her straight naked chest.

"That's okay. I'd like to see all sides of you," Ember said, resting her head against the doorframe; her expression was oddly neutral. Her black hair cascaded over her shoulders and highlighted her nightgown's cleavage. Cinder averted her eyes back to the mirror.

"Gods forbid. I polish my image for a reason." She sighed and bent down to rinse her face off. Smooth again.

When she looked back at Ember, her faint smile had dropped. "I'm sorry for barging in on you," she said, her voice quivering, "I had to admit I lied."



"I know," Cinder sighed. "Talk to me, Em."

Ember took a step forward, but halted suddenly. Her eyes widened at Cinder's bare skin. "Can I hug you?" she asked. After Cinder opened her arms, she let her weight drop against her chest and let her breath go. Cinder embraced her and held her close. "I don't know why I lied. It's a silly thing to lie about. Guess I needed to think. Oh, well. There's nothing to think about either." Cinder waited patiently. There was no rushing her. "I got a marriage proposal. To settle the score with the Lunarians, so to say."

Any ongoing thoughts in Cinder's mind were blown away, leaving behind that pindrop of a word. Her guts floated in the hollow of her abdomen and she thought she'd puke. Without meaning to, she strengthened her hold on Ember, sinking her fingertips on her back like they'd tear her away from her. She managed to string a sentence along — one that wouldn't contribute to Ember's obvious angst. "From whom?"

"Their Crown Prince." Her voice was muffled by Cinder's skin.

"Doesn't that mean... you'll basically be unifying the Ashen Valleys and the Lunar Bay?" Overcoming the initial stun, Cinder felt like blood was rushing to her mind.

"There's a lot of technicality."

"I don't think that's a good idea. They already have nearly the whole continent on a chokehold. If you marry him, we'll never get our sovereignty back."

Ember nudged Cinder's clavicle with her cheek. Cinder wondered if she could hear her heartbeat. "If they won't give up at any cost, maybe giving in is best. We're not ready to resist them."

"We're the ones most suited to resist them," Cinder said, raising her voice unwittingly.

"It's a price in blood my father's not willing to pay."

"So we'll pay forever instead?" Cinder held her close enough to feel her heartbeat over hers. She was so soft against her.

"Cinder... Please. Cinder." Her voice was weak and so was her grasp. "I love you. Back me up. Please."

"I can't vouch for something that you're clearly unhappy about."

Ember hesitated. Cinder could feel it under her hands. "Having you go with me makes me happy enough."

There were more arguments still stuck to Cinder's throat, but they all felt useless. "Of course I'll go," she said instead, placing her chin over Ember's head. "I love you too." The words never failed to heat her chest up; having Ember glued to her like that just made matters worse.

The next few days, Ember was less chatty than usual. There were more more meetings Cinder was left behind for and Ember would come out seemingly exhausted from each of them. Then came a morning when she knocked at their shared door and greeted Cinder with a big smile and open arms. She had one of her casual dresses on; one that clung to her figure more than it should. "Good morning, Cindy!" she said in her usual cheerful tone. "Guess what?"

"What?" Cinder asked. She tried to psych herself up internally to match Ember.

"I have no duties today," Ember said, joining her hands. She grinned. "Know what that means?"

By then, Cinder was smiling too. She did know what it meant. "What does it mean?"

"It's Cimber holiday!" Ember threw her arms up and they were soon enveloping Cinder's neck. It was just a quick celebratory hug, but it made Cinder blush.

"I do love a good Cimber holiday," Cinder said in indulgence. Her hands lingered on Ember's shoulders as the hug waned. They looked too big in comparison; Cinder let them

drop back to the sides of her body and ignored the pinprick in her stomach. "What do we have planned for today, Princess?"

"Well, I don't know. It all depends on your vote," Ember said, shifting her weight from foot to foot and making the skirt of her dress sway. "We could spar. Take a walk. Or... stay in. Just us." She averted her eyes. "Maybe play dress up. Get you out of your armor for a change."

Cinder's eyes widened. "It's... been a while. I'm fully grown now. I won't fit in your dresses, Em." That pinprick multiplied tenfold.

"Skirts for sure, though. Especially wrap-arounds. I could do your makeup." She risked a look at Cinder. "Would you have fun?"

Cinder thought of the last time. She'd been a teenager, still roughly the same size as Ember. Even if she had looked in the mirror and could only focus on her square shoulders, it had been true that her clothes fit her. Being under Ember's gaze had made her hot and exposed all over, like the first layer of her skin had been peeled off. She wasn't opposed to reliving that feeling at all. And Ember had called her *pretty*. She wondered if she could still pass off as pretty. "I might," she conceded. It was Ember, after all.

After breakfast, they went straight to Ember's bedroom and she threw the closet doors open. "Alright. Wanna pick the first one?" she asked.

Cinder crossed her arms. "You pick first. As a warm-up."

Without any hesitation, Ember started working through her clothes; she hummed a cheery tune until she found what she'd been looking for. She gave Cinder a plain looking skirt. "A warm-up, then," she said. They locked eyes for a moment and Ember's eyes widened. "I'll, um, turn around."

After she did, Cinder took a deep breath and unbuckled her belt, putting it aside along with her sword. As she removed her cloth armor and pants, her eyes remained glued to

Ember; though she knew she wasn't looking, an odd chill still coursed through her body. She pulled the skirt up her legs and couldn't find a comfortable place to let it sit. "Done," she said, torn on whether or not to avert her eyes. The magnetic pull of Ember's possible reaction ended up winning. She waited for it with her hands in front of her body, as if she could hide behind them.

Ember turned and the fraction of a second it took for her expression to change had Cinder frozen solid. Then, her smile grew and her eyes lit up; her pupils dilated. "I wish you could wear casual clothes more," she said, her tone softer than usual, "You're always pretty. But this is so..." She paused and her eyes dimmed a little. She averted her gaze and there was the slightest hint of red on her cheeks. It made Cinder's heat up too. "Might be the novelty of it. Anyway, that skirt accentuates your hips. That's my fashion tip."

Too flustered to process the reutilization of *pretty*, Cinder ended up focusing on the last part. It made her too aware of the tight hem of the skirt digging into her waist. "Is that bad?"

"No," Ember said, risking a look at her eyes. Her smile had turned meek. "You have a nice figure."

Cinder's gut sank. She'd been floating because of the look on Ember's face, but that sentence anchored her back to reality. "Not for a woman," she said, regretting it when she heard the bitterness in her own words and saw Ember's smile drop.

"Cindy..." Ember bit her lip and looked away. "I only ever think women have nice figures. I meant it."

"Oh." Cinder was convinced she could hear her own heartbeat when Ember blushed before her. She had to avert her eyes as well.

Ember turned away in an odd silence and ruffled through her clothes again. She handed Cinder a shirt without meeting her gaze. "Try this on." She obeyed, glad to see that the neckline was modest. The long sleeves made her feel somewhat less exposed. Somewhat.

When Ember turned to her again, the blush on her cheeks had subsided. "It's nice to see you out of work clothes. You look good," she said.

"Thank you," Cinder said, keeping her legs close together and her arms crossed.

"Want me to do your makeup?" Ember's smile and sweet words were overbearing. Cinder just nodded. The Princess guided her to the bed and made her sit before placing all the materials she'd use beside her. "Do you want the whole thing or just... fun?"

Cinder raised an eyebrow. "Fun."

"Okaaay. Eyeshadow..." She found what she was looking for and bent down towards Cinder, who closed one of her eyes. She felt a sudden jab on her eyelid and hissed. "Don't be a baby. You're super tough. Stay still," Ember mumbled. After a while, she seemed to get frustrated, shifting positions. Then, her face lit up. "Oh, I know. Lie down," she said, touching a hand to Cinder's chest and pushing her backwards onto the bed gently.

Her back sank into the mattress. Then, Ember's knee beside her thigh made it sink a little. She was climbing over her and, before Cinder knew it, hovering over her lap, one hand beside Cinder's head for support. "Princess?" Cinder blurted out. Her body had mostly been in resting pace before that; then, Ember decided to go ahead and raise her pulse. Her blood flow quickened, bringing boiling heat to her whole body.

"Is this fine? It's easier like this." Her face was too close. Her lips were too close. Her hair was all around. Smelled good. Since registering the situation was taking up all of Cinder's brain power, she just nodded instead of speaking. Mistake. Ember got even closer, her breath warm on Cinder's cheek. She got back to work nonchalantly while Cinder's body reached fusion under her. Though her movements were subtle, Cinder was all too aware of her hovering over her lap and the possibility of them touching. It made her anxious to the point of tensing up completely.

Somehow, it ended. Ember sat over Cinder's hip, dropping all her weight on her with complete confidence — they touched. It petrified Cinder. Ember giggled upon looking at her face. "I told you to stay still, not turn to stone," she said.

Cinder gripped the bedsheet as discreetly as she could, trying to keep herself in check. "You're done?" she asked. Despite her effort, her voice came out a little squeaky.

"Yeah. You have no idea what eyeliner does to you," Ember said. Her eyes were lost somewhere in Cinder's face and her smile was melty. It took a while, but they regained focus and she climbed off. Cinder could finally breathe easier. "Take a look in the mirror," Ember said, pointing at it.

She got up. The sudden reorientation made her dizzy. She wobbled to the mirror and crossed her arms again. The face looking back at her was... The words came to her, but she tried to hold them down. "I look... uncanny."

"Aren't you just not used to it?"

"Maybe." She looked back at Ember, finding what could be concern. At last, she decided to say more. "Doesn't it just look like I'm wearing makeup the way a guy would?"

Ember's face dropped. Why had she asked? She knew there was nothing Ember could say that would instantly change her mind; at most, it was just a bother. "I don't think so. Because you have your eyes," Ember said, taking a step closer and raising her hand slowly. "Cinder's eyes." She booped her nose.

Cinder snorted. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Maybe I've just been with you too long, so I'm biased," Ember smiled, "But I recognize you for who you are no matter what you're wearing. Still, I don't think it's just bias."

Their eyes locked together. Cinder took in Ember's face and something like melancholy tugged at her heartstrings. "I guess I'm happy with that for now," she said.

They ended up laying in bed together with their shoulders touching like they used to do when they were younger and Cimber holidays, more frequent. Cinder peeked at Ember out of the corner of her eye; she had a hand relaxed over her belly and a peaceful smile on her face.

"You should keep those clothes," Ember said.

"They're yours." Besides, Cinder looked too *other* in them.

Ember chuckled. "We both know I have clothes to spare. You look too good in them."

Though she didn't want to weigh her down further, she had to ask. "Really?"

"Really. If I didn't know you, my first impression of you would be..." Ember paused. Her idle hand wandered to her face and dropped over her eyes. "Fierce, but feminine. You have a chilling stare. With eyeliner, then..."

Her words made Cinder go hot again. Unable to find a reply, she just let her own hand find Ember's free one and hold it meekly; but Ember entwined their fingers instead. They spent a while like that and Cinder could swear that her blood came back warmer from where their bodies met. The silence and the gentle touch induced her to near sleep; she was lulled by it until Ember's voice rose again. "Cinder," she called, bringing her to awareness, "Are you really fine going with me?"

"Of course." She furrowed her brow.

"You don't have to. You don't have to go," Ember squeezed her hand.

"What? I'm sworn to you, Ember." Cinder turned on her side to look her straight in the eye.

"That doesn't matter. This is just engagement talks, but after we get married I'll most likely have to live in the Bay. Then will you still go with me?" Ember's eyes were wide and she held onto Cinder tightly.

"It doesn't matter where."

"I don't care about your oath. I only want you to do this if you're comfortable," Ember said, lowering her voice as she inched closer. She visibly hesitated, her lips parted. "I fear I've been too forward with you. There's a power imbalance in our relationship-

"I don't feel that." Cinder interrupted her, coming even closer. Their foreheads were almost touching.

"But there is. In a way I'm your employer and your safety net at the same time. I want you to know that I'll support you whether or not you're with me. I'll make every arrangement necessary for you to have a good life without me, Cinder. You don't have to move with me." She spoke faster than usual, her eyes so wide Cinder could lose herself within them. At some point, both her hands had found Cinder's and they were holding onto each other like it was a life or death situation.

Cinder sighed, closing her eyes for a bit to regain her focus. Ember was too intense. "It's not about the oath," she admitted. "I can't imagine life without you. Whatever happens, we go through it together. I don't want to hear you say that anymore. Alright?"

Ember did touch her forehead to hers at last. She exhaled. "Alright. I'm just worried that I might be taking advantage of you."

"That's ridiculous." Cinder rolled her eyes; the exaggerated nature of it made Ember laugh.

"I'm serious. *Very* serious, Cindy," she said, her smile trembling.

"I am, too. So stop." She brought their hands up to her chest. "It kind of offends me that you think I don't care about you. I know you don't want to go. What kind of friend would I be if I let you go alone?"

"I'm fine with going," she said, closing her eyes. "I'm fine." She shuddered.

It was useless to call her out on the lie. They just stayed together like that, hoping the isolated reality of their holiday would overpower any other issues.



They were so busy after that that the days went by in a flash; things only slowed down when the night of the farewell party came along. Cinder had to get the fancy clothes out of the bottom of her wardrobe, red sash and everything. When she saw Ember, she had to bite her tongue so as not to gasp. The layers of her dress were all colored like fire and seemed to mix when she spun. The light of the smile on her face when they looked at each other was just as blinding.

The ballroom was packed and Ember, right at the center of attention. People queued up to dance with her, twirling her around and laughing to soft music. Cinder couldn't help but keep her back to the wall, arms on the sides of her body like a good little guard. Ember would ever so often pause to drink. One of those times, she wandered over to her. "You're not here to guard," she said, frowning, "It's your party too. Let loose, Cindy." She poured a cup of what looked like liquor. "Here." She smiled as she extended it out to her.

"I'm always on duty around you," Cinder said, shaking her head.

"Kick back with me. That's your duty today," Ember said. "After this, we'll be on the road for a long time." Hesitant, Cinder took the cup. Ember smiled. "Good. Now, with me," she started, raising her own cup, "Bottoms up."

"What? No," Cinder protested. Ember ignored her and did it anyway. To be fair, she found herself having to do it as well. The drink burned her throat and went down hard.

"Gods, that's awful."

"Just the first one," Ember giggled, setting the cups aside to grip Cinder's arm with both her hands; she tugged on it. "You haven't danced with me yet."

"I shouldn't. I'm your guard."

"I'm being passed around, but *you* haven't touched me at all," Ember grumbled. Her cheeks were red from drinking. "How is that fair?"

Looking at Ember's frown softened Cinder. "Will you be happy if I do?"

Her smile instantly grew. "I'll be so, *so* happy," she said, giggling again.

Cinder allowed herself to be pulled along to the middle of the ballroom. Suddenly it felt like all eyes were on her and her hands on their Princess' shoulders. A chill ran through her spine and she locked in place. Ember clicked her tongue. "No, no," she said, sliding one of Cinder's hands down to her waist and holding the other up. "Your hand on my waist," Ember whispered, "Keep me close."

With her own cheeks red, Cinder nodded. She led Ember to the rhythm of the music. Dancing was simple, but enduring her gaze wasn't — especially not when Cinder's hand was on her waist and the fabric of her dress was so thin that she could feel the warmth of her body. In fact, they were close enough to bask in each other's heat. Out of nowhere, Ember giggled again. "After this song, let's have another round of shots. Then another," she said.

"You're already drunk, Princess."

"I'm gonna get wasted today."

"That's unseemly for a princess," Cinder said, raising an eyebrow.

"You'll protect me from the public eye if it comes to that. I trust you," she said, closing her eyes as she twirled. Damn. "You're swift."

"I never agreed to that," Cinder teased, dipping her.

As Ember's hair fell in waves, her eyes widened. "Sorry, Cindy. I just feel better when you take care of me."

Cinder pulled her back up. Their bodies touched. "I'm kidding. I'll always care for you, Princess," she whispered. The song spelled out its final notes and she took a step back to bow at Ember, who just grumbled.

"A drink and one more. Just one more song," Ember pleaded.

"Don't play favorites."

"I owe you lots. It's not favoritism," Ember said, drunk enough to drag her tongue on the *ism*.

It was hard to resist Ember's wants. In any case, it's not like she wanted to resist them; she'd do so outwardly in hopes of stopping the oncoming slippery slope. Of course Cinder would dance. There was nothing in the whole world that felt better than Ember's tender body next to hers and nothing quite like her awed face when Cinder dipped her. But if she kept saying *yes*, they would only dance with each other. Still, she ended up acquiescing. Just one more. But they drank and danced and Cinder didn't see time go by. While she focused on Ember's smile, laughter and hands, the party dwindled around them.

At some point, Ember dropped her head on Cinder's shoulder while they slowdanced. "Cindy," she called, "Take me to my room."

"Yeah," Cinder mumbled. She linked their arms and dragged Ember out of the ballroom after brief goodbyes.

Being wobbly as well, it was hard to walk in a straight line when all Ember did was slump against her. "Cindy," she whined again, "Carry me."

"I might drop you."

"It's fine." It sounded more like *ish* than *it's*, though.

She bent down to collect Ember, picking her up with ease: one arm under her knees and the other cradling her back. Ember giggled and hugged her neck while Cinder regained her balance. "We're good," she mumbled, trying to convince herself of it as she carried Ember back.

"It's like floating," Ember said, dropping her head against her chest and closing her eyes.

"Yeah," Cinder said absentmindedly, losing her gaze in Ember's tranquil face. "Enjoy it," she whispered.

She dropped Ember on her bed, which prompted her to laugh again for some reason, and retreated to her own room. She was drunk enough that undoing all the buckles on her armor made her cuss. Patience lost, she plopped down on her bed in her undergarments, too tired to put on pajamas. Sleep crept in fast, which only made her heart beat faster when Ember knocked on their shared door. She got up in a flash, stumbling in the dark and nearly banging her head on a wall. At last, she managed to open the door.

"What happened?" she asked, wide awake.

"Cindyyy," Ember whined yet again. She was still in her party gown, though it looked like she'd managed to open it partly; one of the sleeves was sliding down her shoulder. "I don't wanna sleep alone."

"You want to sleep in my room?"

She nodded. Cinder took a step aside and she trotted in, making a beeline for Cinder's bed. Cinder sighed and opened the wardrobe in search of extra blankets to throw on the floor. Before she could, though, Ember extended her arms out. "Cindy. Come here," she said.

"What?"

"With me."

Something dug at the back of Cinder's brain, but it was too numbed out to understand what the warning meant. She laid down and Ember immediately attacked her with the blanket, covering her up and pulling her closer. "There you go. Snug snug," she said. Her breath smelled like liquor.

"Are you okay?" Cinder asked. The alcohol made her body heat up faster.

"Cinder..." Ember's voice turned mellow as she found Cinder's hand under the covers and squeezed it. "I'm sorry."

"What?"

"You're the best... no, not thing..." She paused, contorting her face. "Event. Occurrence that ever happened in my life."

"You too. You have nothing to be sorry about, Em."

Ember touched her forehead to hers, making her breathing difficult. "But I am. For dragging you down with me. I should dissolve your oath or something. But I just can't imagine going without you. It's selfish. I..." The pace of her words turned rambling. As she slurred the syllables, Cinder had a hard time following.

"Ember. I want to go. It's okay," she said, squeezing her hand harder. "You're the one who doesn't want to go."

"That doesn't matter. What I want doesn't matter," Ember said, choking midway.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing." She stammered. "I'm happy enough if you're around." She sobbed, her torso contracting. Was that what she'd been choking on? Tears streamed down her face and Cinder's torso felt tight as well.

"I'll always be with you."

"Now it feels like... I'm manipulating you." She sobbed some more.

"Shut up, Ember. You're drunk."

She laughed and sobbed all at the same time. "I love you, Cinder."

"I love you too. That's why it's fine," she whispered, closing her eyes.

Ember's fingers were cold under hers; her sobs made her whole body tremble. "You're my love," Ember whispered, holding onto her desperately.

It made lights crackle in Cinder's barely aware mind. She brought Ember closer and hugged her tight, trying to make the sobs subside. "Yes," she whispered back. Whatever would soothe her, even if she didn't get what it meant.

Waking to Ember's warmth beside her was like floating in a bubble separate from reality. When Cinder turned on her side to look at her, she found Ember's normally wavy hair completely disordered, some of it sticking to a bit of dry drool on the corner of her mouth. It made her heart swell and she clutched her own chest instinctively. *You're my love*. The words popped into her mind as she watched Ember's soft expression. The swelling grew and she swore her heart wouldn't be able to take it. As soon as Ember woke up, would she remember too? She couldn't have meant to say it. Would it be better if she hadn't said it? At that moment, she just wished she could freeze time and keep Ember peacefully asleep forever. Before, she'd thought knowing Ember returned her feelings would complete her; now that she did, it made her blood run cold.

Ember didn't stay asleep. Her eyelids fluttered open and her eyes widened at Cinder, her pupils huge. She spat the hair that'd gotten into her mouth out and sat up in a flash, holding her head and wincing. "Easy there," Cinder mumbled, sitting up as well.

"*Fuck*," Ember muttered, rubbing her forehead.

"Wow."

"Fuck, Cinder. I'm sorry. I overdid it."

"Don't apologize," Cinder said, scooting over to the edge of the bed. The air against her skin made her realize she'd gone to sleep in her underwear. "You had the right to." She dragged the blanket over her lap.

Ember's cheeks reddened and she averted her eyes. "I didn't even change clothes. I don't even know how I ended up on your bed."

Knowing she didn't remember her own drunken words filled Cinder with odd, heavy loneliness. "You were sad and couldn't sleep alone," she said, crossing her arms.

"Ah. I'm sorry, Cindy. Forget about that for me." Ember rubbed her own arm and adjusted her falling sleeve.

"Stop apologizing. I care about you," Cinder said. She stood, suddenly unable to sit beside her anymore. Her lungs felt filled up. "More than anything. If you need someone to sleep close to and cry with, that's alright." She slid into clean pants and buckled her belt on as fast as she could. Ember's eyes burned on her naked back.

"I'm apologizing for making you worry," Ember said. "I'm alright."

Cinder gripped the edge of the wardrobe door with all her might, biting her lower lip. "You're not alright." The lies were starting to burn.

"Cinder..." She started, cutting herself short. She took an audible deep breath. "Fine. But I will be, because it's the only option."

Cinder slumped forward a little, leaning her forehead against one of the shelves. *You're my love*. Standing there with her skin bare for her to see, she might as well be completely exposed. She wondered if Ember knew how cold her guts felt right then. "Em. Have you ever thought of marrying the one you love?" It came out like a near whisper. The room's air pressure increased.

"That's not one of the options," Ember said, letting out a sad chuckle.

"But you do have someone you love?" Cinder asked, still unable to face her.

There was a moment of silence. "No, not really," Ember said, completely nonchalant.

Cinder smiled and held back her own chuckle. *You're my love*. It kept repeating in her head, making her eyes water. Nausea hit her. "I guess that's for the best," she said, trying to keep her voice stable. "Is your baggage done?"

"Yeah."

"Cool. You should get changed for breakfast." There was another pause. At last, Ember left her alone and she banged her head against the shelf without much force.

To occupy her hands while her mind wandered, Cinder helped load all the baggage. Even though she was trying to keep busy, she couldn't peel her eyes off Ember, who was always in her orbit — well, it was probably the other way around, actually. While Cinder and the others piled up bags in the plaza, the Greylands stood around hugging and saying their goodbyes. None of the Ashlings had come for Cinder, so she just watched.

The King unclipped his sword and held it out towards Ember. It was a beautiful old thing, Greyland emblem on the hilt and all. Hesitant, Ember took it, holding it meekly. "To keep you safe," he said, enveloping his wife's shoulders with his arm, "And remind you that your mother and father are proud of you."

Ember smiled. Even from that distance, Cinder could see the twinkle in her eyes. "Thank you. It'll never leave my belt," she said, twisting the sword. It looked quite light. Rapiers always looked deceptively light. "I'll miss you guys." She held the sword away and dove in for a hug; her parents embraced her.

"We'll miss you too," her mother said, kissing the top of her head.

Cinder turned away and swallowed the bitter taste in her mouth. No use; it crawled up to her nostrils and made breathing hurt. She got back to stuffing baggage away. There was only one goodbye that would ever matter and, as far as she was concerned, it wasn't anywhere near. When it came time to board the coach, Ember's eyes hardly met hers. They sat side by side, Ember with her hands on her lap. Since morning, there'd been an odd tension between them. Would it be like that the whole trip?

"I sense you're mad at me," Ember said softly, looking at her out of the corner of her eye.

Cinder looked out the door. They were still alone for the time being. "Leave what's mine for me to manage. You haven't done anything wrong," she said. It was true; anger had



overtaken the bottom of her stomach, spitting acid. It only subsided because Ember had made her pause.

"Okay..." Ember mumbled, averting her gaze. "But why? What got you like this?"

With a sigh, Cinder shrugged. "I'm not as resolute as you are."

"Ah. You still headbutting fate and responsibility?" Ember offered her a sad little smile.

Her choice of words made Cinder's stomach churn. "It doesn't matter," she said, lowering her voice, "I'll get my behavior in check. Promise."

"Thank you. For being a supportive friend." Ember took her hand. Her grasp was loose.

Cinder had to swallow down acid reflux. "That's all I ever want to be."

The trip was endless while it lasted, especially because Cinder abhorred every waking minute of it. She both wanted it to end and to last forever — though the traveling conditions were torturous, arriving at their destination seemed more like an apocalyptic notion. But they did and the world didn't shatter. No, it merely swayed under Cinder's travel weary legs, making her nauseous. Lunarians swarmed around Ember as soon as they disembarked, smothering her with warm welcomes. She dealt with it far better than Cinder; the sudden warmth of that many bodies made her nausea grow in intensity and she had to take deep breaths.

They were led through huge plazas, passing through stone arches and intricate sculptures. Ember's eyes wandered around and finally landed on Cinder's face; they were wide. As if they hadn't been dazzled enough, the Lunarians leading them around kept explaining the purpose of each structure. When Ember's eyes widened at Cinder again, the knight decided to pipe up. "Excuse me, miss," she said, hogging their guide's attention, "I believe Princess Greyland must be quite tired. We had a long trip. Could she be led to her room for now?"

After exaggerated apologies, the guide obliged. They walked too much. How was that place so big? Halls and hallways merged in Cinder's tired mind. They finally stopped in front of an ornate wooden door. "This is your room, Princess," the guide said, offering her a key, "We shall have your baggage delivered."

Ember hardly contained her sigh of relief. "Thank you."

The guide turned to Cinder. "Your room is on the opposite wing. Do you want to see it already, ma'am?"

She sneaked a peek at Ember. As predicted, her brow instantly furrowed and she clutched her new key. "Excuse me," Ember said, lifting her chin. "That won't do."

"Pardon me?"

Ember took a step forward, narrowing her eyes. "That won't do. In my letters, I specifically requested that Cinder and I be put in adjacent rooms *with* a shared door in the middle. No less than that." Her intense gaze mellowed out and she smiled. "If you'd arrange that for me, please."

The woman shrank. "I'm sorry, Princess. But the rooms we offer to guests of your caliber are..."

"I don't care about the amenities. Cinder is my knight. She doesn't spend a single hour away from me without me signing off on it," Ember said, her eyes wide again. It was the smoldering look again. Even though it wasn't upon Cinder, it made her body go up in flames.

"With all due respect, Princess, but there are plenty of guards around. You have no reason to feel unsafe."

Ember looked about to snarl. "None of them are Ashen knights. Most importantly, none of them are sworn to me. You won't make me repeat myself. I believe I was quite clear the first time around." She crooked her head and narrowed her eyes again. "Disappear."

The woman turned tail and Ember crossed her arms, leaning against the wall. She kept her gaze on the floor. "Damn, Em. I didn't think you'd ever play the spoiled mean girl. Especially not for me."

"It's not spoiled and it's not about you. This is a boundary I expressed clearly a month ago," she said, lowering her voice. "I'm already giving too much of myself. If they infringe on the little that's left, soon I won't have anything."

Her sudden seriousness clutched at Cinder's heart. There it was. No matter how much Ember smiled and said she was fine, she was desperate enough to make such calculations. "Oh," she mumbled, leaning against the wall too. "It is *mean girl* though, right?"

"It is," Ember sighed. "Guess it's a length I'm willing to go to."

As it turned out, Ember's temper tantrum did get them the rooms they wanted. Cinder did most of the settling in. While she threw Ember's bags in a pile, she lifted her eyes to her. She had her arms crossed and a distant stare.

"Hey, Princess," Cinder called, pausing to stretch her arms out. "Were you serious when you said you want to sign off on everything I do?" She smiled a little.

Ember smiled a bit too. "When it comes to you, the only one whose will I respect is yours," she said. After staring at each other for a moment, Ember averted her eyes. "You should rest. We'll probably have dinner to attend today."

"Will I be invited?"

"We'll have a problem otherwise," Ember said, frowning. When she looked at Cinder, her expression softened. Her hands wandered to her belt and freed the Greylands' rapier. She turned the hilt to Cinder's direction. "Here. I want you to hang onto it for me."

Cinder raised her hand, but halted midway, her fingers not even touching it. "It's your family's sword. I can't carry it."

"And I'm my family's jewel," Ember shrugged, "I'm yours to keep. I trust you with my life." She let out a long sigh. "Give me yours."

Though Cinder frowned, she obeyed, handing her her double-edged sword. "You don't know this kind of swordplay."

"I won't need to unsheathe it. That's why I have you." She twisted the sword in her hand, troubled by its weight. She rubbed her thumb against the pommel for a moment. For some reason Cinder didn't know, she looked sad. "Get some sleep, Cindy."

"Yeah," she mumbled, the hand that held the rapier burning.

She woke to quick knocks on their shared door. At least that was familiar. Opening it revealed Ember with one hand holding her hair up and the other keeping her corset in place. Cinder felt her cheeks flush and focused her eyes on Ember's.

"Cindy, would you tie this up for me, please?" she asked, holding it tight.

"No servants around?" With a light smile, Cinder obliged, doing her best not to touch her. It wasn't the first time Ember appeared half-naked in her room. It had felt much more innocent before. *You're my love*. The words burned a hole through Cinder's brain and down her neck, making her shudder as she tightened the corset.

"The sudden room change made a mess of everything," Ember said. She turned to Cinder when it was done. "Thanks. You should start getting ready."

She nodded and Ember disappeared back into her room. Getting ready didn't take as long for Cinder as it did for Ember. So she still had time to laze around, the rapier clipped to her belt feeling like a huge weight. When she escorted Ember out of her room, her red dress matched Cinder's ceremonial sash. The Lunarian sunset came with a sudden cold breeze that chilled her face.

"This guy. What do you know about him?" she asked, making sure to whisper.

"You mean the Crown Prince?" Ember smiled, obviously entertained. "His name is Howell Duskhand. He's a few years older than me."

"I know all that. I'm asking what he's like," Cinder frowned.

"I guess we'll find out."

"Doesn't this bother you in the slightest? You're supposed to marry him."

Ember stared at her for a while. Then, her worn smile came back. "Out of duty, so it really doesn't matter in the end."

Cinder dropped it. Ember and complacency were two of the most contradictory things in her mind, but there they were. They walked past people draped in expensive colors with

touches of silver glimmer all over. At last they got to huge arched double doors, their wood sculpted in an elaborate texture. The Lunarian guards pushed them open upon their arrival without need for further introduction, even though Cinder suddenly felt that they were considerably underdressed.

She saw him immediately: on the opposite side of the room, a dark-haired man in a blue cape adorned by glitzy silver, tiny stars dangling from delicate chains that hung from his shoulders. He smiled and lifted his wine glass towards them, his eyes widening at Ember instantly. People got out of their way as they crossed the big dining hall towards him. His eyes were a deep dark and his smile was sharp and a terrible, terrible spark lit itself in Cinder's gut. Her stomach churned and acid burned the bottom of it. She'd imagined him as a hideous older man, but there he was with his bright eyes, pointy chin and high cheekbones. Fuck.

He reached his hand out to Ember, one foot behind the other as if he was posing for a painting. "By the looks of you, you must be Princess Ember Greyland," he said. His voice was fucking smooth, too. Smoother than Cinder's.

Ember accepted his hand and Howell bent down to kiss her knuckles lightly. Though his lips barely grazed her skin, the acid in Cinder's stomach seemed to burn a hole through it. "What exactly about my looks made me seem like Ember Greyland?" she asked, smiling. Was that teasing? Cinder peered at her eyes. No.

Howell looked off to the side for a brief moment and snapped his fingers. A servant appeared with a bottle of wine and poured a glass. "Your eyes. Deep amber. Related to the name, I suppose?" he asked, his smile growing.

She laughed. "No. I'm named for Volcana. In any case, I'm graced by our meeting." Ember accepted the glass of wine and took a sip. Her fingers were delicate around it and

Cinder wondered if she could still feel Howell's lips on her hand. It made her shudder. "This is my knight, Cinder Ashling."

Torn from her rage, Cinder bowed to him. The heat of anger turned to shame. "Cinder. An unusual name for a man," he said, waving the gesture away. Cinder straightened herself out and froze, keeping her lips tight.

"Cinder's a woman," Ember said, a stern note in her voice.

"Pardon me. Southern men tend to be quite effeminate, so you understand my blunder."

"I'd appreciate it if you dropped the matter." Her pupils were contracted as she stared at him.

"Of course. House Ashling, yes? Historical ally of the Greylands, if I'm well brushed up on my geopolitics. Would you also like a glass of wine, Miss Ashling?" He gestured to the bottle. "Ashen wine, as courtesy to our esteemed guests."

"I'm very thankful, Your Highness, but I'm not supposed to drink on the job."

"Nonsense. You have no reason to be on duty. There are countless guardians and knights around." He spoke as he guided them to a lavish couch. The Lunarian's royal dining hall sure had much more in the way of comfort than theirs. "By the way, I understand there was an issue related to your knight and your assigned rooms?"

"There was. I believe I was very specific," Ember frowned.

"Once again, I'm sorry. As I said, security is so tight here that I completely forgot about your request, since I didn't think it'd be an issue."

"You'll excuse me, Prince Howell, but none of your knights are Ashen knights," Ember said.

Cinder felt a pinprick on her nape. Perhaps Ember was being a little too forward. Fortunately, he didn't seem bothered; instead, he chuckled. "So you're implying our knights are inferior?"

"I wouldn't be able to make such a statement. All I'm saying is Ashen knights are exhaustively trained."

He mm-ed and took another sip of his wine, crossing his legs. "I have a fun proposal for you."

"Pray tell."

"We'll put your beliefs to the test. If Miss Ashling would be up for it, she could duel three of our best Estella knights. If she wins, I won't question your need for her again. Besides, we have to arrange some entertainment for your stay. Nothing better than an old fashioned duel."

"How come she's got to beat three of them?"

"If an Ashen knight's really that much better, shouldn't it be easy?" He smiled.

"You're a devil." She shared his smile. The remark seemed to entertain him further. Not fair. How come he was so mild-mannered? He couldn't be both handsome and easygoing. There had to be *one* downside to him. He sat there laughing and drinking while Cinder burned. She nearly missed the playful look Ember tossed her way before saying: "Cinder will do it. She'll duel all of them."

"You're not even going to ask her if she's alright with that?"

"She's my knight. Of course she's alright with it," Ember said, looking at her out of the corner of her eye. It made Cinder shiver.

Though Cinder remained a bit stuck on that proposition, their conversation quickly evolved past it without her. Howell kept engaging Ember in matters of Ashen culture and geography as though he actually cared — and she replied to it all with a smile, as if a Lunarian could hold any appreciation for their country. Cinder had been staring at him so intensely that her eyes were starting to burn, all dried out.



"I really admire your country's history of resilience," he said at some point. Somehow, they'd gone down that road.

"So you believe our stories?" Ember smiled, obviously doubtful. That made Cinder unwittingly match her smile.

"What's there not to believe? Lunarian scholars know better than anyone that there are things in and out of this world far beyond our comprehension," he said, swirling the wine in his glass.

The Princess chuckled. Cinder liked to imagine that there was a note of disdain in it; euphoria trickled down her spine. "So you believe in Volcana and still take a liberal approach to black magic?" There's no way he could weasel out of that one.

"Vitality leeching is a mere tool. You can't put a tool under moral scrutiny."

"It's an inherently damaging tool," Ember replied, "Though we won't get anywhere discussing a centuries old disagreement."

"That we won't." He sighed. "I'd rather have your company for more pleasant conversations. Though it isn't necessary, I'd be thrilled if we could get along." Again, that smile. Did he think he looked charming? The rapier in Cinder's belt was heavier by the second and her dominant hand itched to grab it. Even punches would suffice — a strong enough one and his lips would soon be too swollen to form a smile.

"Of course. I want nothing else." Ember smiled back, her cheeks rising.

Cinder got up to look for a glass of water, realizing that she'd been nursing a headache. The indistinct conversations of the sea of other guests were much less taxing on her ears than the one she'd been enduring.

Much later, as they walked back to their rooms, Ember kept sneaking peeks at her. Once they were standing in front of her door, she looked up at Cinder with a meekness that didn't belong to her. "You seem annoyed," she said.

Cinder sighed. "A little. Sorry, I said I'd keep my behavior in check."

"Is it because I put you up to those duels?" Her eyes were wide. Oh, she was actually worried. Cinder's stomach dropped.

"No, Em. Put me up to anything," she said. She reached out for Ember's hand and held it lightly. "Anyone would be annoyed after listening to that guy's blabber for so long."

Her face eased and she laughed a little. "What, Howell? He wasn't so bad." When she saw Cinder's furrowed brow, her smile dropped. "Well, he did misgender you."

"That's not it. He's not the first to misgender me and he won't be the last." She snorted. "He just thinks he's hot shit," she said, lowering her voice and making sure no one was around.

Ember shrugged. "He kind of is."

"But he shouldn't act like it."

"To be honest, I'm pleased. I expected worse. As he said, it's best if the two of us get along." Ember looked at her expectantly after saying it.

Cinder's lips curled as her stomach churned and she had to bite her tongue. The last sentence echoed in her mind. It was no use lashing out at Ember. None at all. She took a deep breath. "Good night, Princess," she said, taking a step back and placing her hand on her own door's knob.

"Will you be alright?" Ember didn't budge.

"Don't worry about it." She turned the knob and retreated to loneliness. The anger didn't subside, but it burned less without Ember's worried face in sight.

The next morning, Ember informed her with a sad smile that she had meetings Cinder couldn't sit in on. Thus, Cinder ended up wandering to the guard training grounds — shaking off the soreness from the trip seemed like a wise decision since she'd been subscribed to duels and all. There was ample space and the sun wasn't too harsh. She left her cloth armor on a bench along with the Greylands' rapier, even though leaving it unattended felt deeply wrong.

She was in the middle of a series of abdominals when a woman in knight attire interrupted her, bending with her hands on her knees to look into her eyes. "Hey. You're that Ashling girl, aren't you?" she asked, smiling. Her dark short hair curled around her sharp face.

"Yeah?" Cinder furrowed her brow, letting her back rest on the ground. Her abdomen burned.

"Do you really think you can beat three of our best knights?" she asked, cocking her head. Her eyes were just as sharp as her cheekbones, but there was a glimmer in them. Her gloves looked too big for her hands.

"The Princess put me up to it," she said simply. It seemed obvious that the woman was looking for trouble.

"Ah. Don't have much choice against our superiors, eh. For a second there, I thought you were just cocky." She straightened herself out. "I'm Trisha. You'll be fighting me." She reached out to Cinder.

She accepted her hand and Trisha pulled her up with steady force. Cinder felt that familiar fluttering in her stomach, suddenly all too aware that her shirt was quite glued to her skin. "It's good to meet you, then," she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"It's always good to measure out the competition. Say..." she paused, eyeing Cinder with seeming hunger. "Would you like to spar?"

Cinder shook her head. "Sorry. The Princess would want me to keep a low profile until the duels."

Trisha chuckled and she felt herself blush a little. "So you actually think you have a shot?"

"I was asked to try." She shrugged.

"You're funny. Princess this, Princess that," Trisha said. That made Cinder's blush intensify. Denying it would possibly make the situation worse, so she didn't say anything. "Can I at least accompany you?"

"Sure."

Trisha unbuckled her armor and, when she slid out of it, Cinder took longer than she should have to avert her eyes. She was tall and slender and the soft curvature of muscles was quite visible under the skin of her arms. She didn't look like Ember at all, a voice in Cinder's head whispered. For a moment, that seemed like an odd thing to think.

As Trisha stretched, she said: "That rapier you got there. It has the Greyland emblem."

"Yeah. It's not mine," Cinder clarified. "The Princess just asked me to hold on to it."

"Is it true that all the Greylands are taught swordplay?" Cinder just yeah'd again.

"Hmm. Is your Princess any good?"

"She's just as good as me with a rapier."

"Oh, then you mustn't be very good," Trisha teased, smiling wide at her. When Cinder didn't react, she sighed and added: "I'm trying to get you riled up, but you're being difficult about it."

"I'm not one to gloat," Cinder said, getting back to the ground, "Especially not *before* a fight."

"What fun is it to gloat *after* you've already won? Anyone can do that. Doesn't take any guts." Trisha joined her on the floor, still eyeing her eagerly.

"Just not my thing."

"Sure. Act mysterious."

After that, Trisha just exercised with her without bickering too much. She did start aimless conversations and Cinder gave her short replies, humoring her. Talking to anyone besides Ember felt too foreign.

The next few days rolled around and Ember was still too busy to spend time with her. That led Cinder back to the training grounds in comfortable clothes. Trisha caught her in the middle of exercising again, her tall frame allowing her eyes to be at the same level as Cinder's — which she used to her full advantage, peering deep into them as if trying to dig out her secrets. It made Cinder shiver.

"Come on. You've been spending hours here everyday. Don't you have anything else to do with yourself?" she asked, smiling.

"The Princess is busy," Cinder replied, focusing on punching a dummy. It was true, though. Her muscles were sore.

Beside her, Trisha mimicked crying, rubbing her eyes and pouting. "Wah, wah, Princess this, Princess that. For fuck's sake." When Cinder frowned, she smiled. "Don't you have any hobbies, Ashling?"

"This is my hobby."

"No, that's part of your job." Because Cinder merely stopped and stared at her, she scoffed and added: "Does your life revolve around guarding your Princess?"

Cinder blinked. "Pretty much, yeah."

"That's pathetic. Come on, let's go do something else," she said, tugging on Cinder's naked arm. Even though Trisha wore gloves, the sudden touch made her shrink.

"Like what?"

"I think there'll be a play in the amphitheater today."

"I hate theater." Upon Trisha's visible surprise, she added: "It's long and excessively dramatic. No one feels that much angst in real life. Too much tear jerking."

"You're just bitter, then. Alright, I see you won't enjoy the arts. *Fine*. Not even music?"

Cinder crossed her arms. Under Trisha's focused stare, she felt sweaty and disgusting. "Music is fine."

"Can you play?"

"A little bit of guitar, but I'm awful."

"Great. There are some extra instruments lying around in the music room." Cinder scowled and she tugged at her arm again, pulling her along. "We can jog there if that makes you feel better."

Though there was nothing appealing about the proposed activity to Cinder, she found herself breaking into a jog anyways. Trisha's hair bobbed up and down by her side and she had an easy smile. Maybe it was fine.

"I don't get why you're making me do things."

"Because you're really pitiful," Trisha said, chuckling. "Besides, you'll be fighting me. That gives me an itch."

"An itch."

"Yeah. Here we are," she said, halting and pushing a door open. A medium room lined by windows on one side greeted them; there were heavy curtains and the sun rays made specks of dust visible. "You'll find a guitar in that cupboard over there," she pointed.

Despite being reluctant, Cinder marched over like she'd received an order. She retrieved the guitar and turned around to find that Trisha had plopped down on a cushion. She smiled at Cinder and patted down another one beside her. Still obedient, Cinder sat down and crossed her legs, lodging the guitar atop them. "What exactly are we doing?"

"I was out of ideas," Trisha said, shrugging. "Then I thought I could teach you some traditional Lunarian songs."

"Oh."

"Pass me the guitar." Cinder did and Trisha got comfortable with it, taking her gloves off. Her fingers were long and delicate and Cinder closed her own hands into fists, trying to ignore the sting in her gut. Trisha tuned it with care and it was obvious that she actually knew what she was doing. She strummed out the first note and gave a nod of approval. "This is a weird zoophiliac-esque song that is supposedly a metaphor for forbidden knowledge."

"That sounds lovely."

Trisha laughed. Her voice had all the right velvety round corners. Somehow, Cinder was torn between thinking it was pretty and feeling envious of it. The song was short and, though the notes were sweet, the lyrics were just as disturbing as she'd envisioned it. When Trisha was done, she cleared her throat and handed Cinder the guitar. "Now you try playing it."

"I can't memorize things in one go," Cinder said, frowning.

"You don't have to. We're just killing time. Here," Trisha said, scooting over to sit behind Cinder. Suddenly, her hands were on hers and she readjusted Cinder's fingers, unaware that her chest was burning and her cheeks were flushed. "This is the first note. Hit it."

Breathing burned. Trisha smelled like soap and subtle lavender. Even still, Cinder acquiesced. "Good. It progresses like..." So, Trisha led her through the first section. Afterwards, she took her hands away from hers so she could try it on her own. Cinder tried to ignore her sudden shakiness and replayed the first section, listening closely to each note. It was too similar to being tutored, put under the scrutiny of someone else. The first note that

she messed up felt horribly dissonant and she hissed, stopping altogether to replay it. Doing the same thing over and over again was the only way to ensure she was up to standards.

Trisha's fingers stopped hers. "What's up?"

"I missed that note," Cinder justified.

"So what? You could have just kept going like normal. It didn't sound that different."

Slowly, Trisha let her hand go, as if afraid Cinder would slap the guitar or something.

"Of course it did."

"It's really not that big of a deal."

"But it *is*," Cinder said, hating how rough her voice came out, "If you're too lenient once, soon you'll be lax in everything." And mediocre wasn't good enough.

"Damn, Ashling. You sound like you have anger issues."

"I don't have fucking anger issues." Cinder pointed her eyes at the ground, all too aware of Trisha's glare on her nape.

"If you treat your fighting the same way, I'm actually starting to get a little scared of our duel," she said in a teasing voice. She laid back, resting on the floor. Cinder finally had more room to breathe. "Hey, Ashling. Have you always wanted to be a knight?"

"No." Cinder put the guitar aside, cold shame dripping down her spine due to her earlier outburst. "I was a spare child in the family."

"What would you have preferred?"

Cinder stayed quiet for a moment. "Did you always want to be a knight?"

"Always. Didn't you think knights were cool when you were a kid? In all the bedtime stories, they'd ride off with a princess and they were free to adventure as they pleased. Cool as shit."

"My parents didn't read me bedtime stories," Cinder said.

"You're hopeless." Trisha sighed.



She only got some alone time with Ember in her bedroom after dinner. The Princess had invited her in to laze around before going to sleep. Cinder sat in Ember's bed as she undid her hairdo in front of the vanity, waves of dark hair becoming free. "I had brunch with Howell today," Ember said, seeming quite chipper.

"You're on a first name basis?" Cinder asked, her brow furrowing. When Ember merely shrugged, sourness climbed up to her mouth. "I hung out with Trisha today," she said, crossing her arms and trying to ignore the light hint of shame.

"Trisha?"

"One of the knights who I'll duel."

"Speaking of which," Ember said, throwing her hair back with her hands, "Howell has made the arrangements. You're fighting on Saturday, in the amphitheater." She stood up and turned to Cinder, suddenly sporting a serious look. "I want you to go all out. Make it humiliating."

Her gaze was chilling. Cinder felt a drop of sweat run down her neck. "Do you really think that's prudent?"

"You were right when you said we're the ones most suited to resist them. It's time we sent a message," Ember said, walking over and bending to Cinder. "Show them what an Ashen knight is capable of."

Cinder's throat tightened up a little. Ember's eyes were wide and glued to her. It felt like she emitted hot waves when she was serious. "I'll need my own sword, then."

Ember unclipped it from her belt and handed it to her. "I'll loan it to you if you'll win for me."

"I will."

The Princess smiled. There it was. That chill. "This Trisha girl. You can wipe the floor with her, can't you?"

"Absolutely."

"I'm sure, Cindy." She sighed and sat beside her. The threatening aura immediately subsided. "I wish we could spend more time together."

"Yeah." It came out as casual as ever, but Cinder's chest was tight.

### 3

Having a task to fulfill made the days go by a little easier. Cinder bided her time until Saturday without any trouble. At the height of morning, she buckled on her full cloth armor, clipped the sword onto her belt — her own sword this time, double edged — and tied her hair up tight. When she met Ember outside of her room, the Princess' eyes widened. "You look so... prepared," she said, the apparent surprise fading into a tiny smile.

"I am. I said I'd win," Cinder said, sticking her arm out so Ember could link their arms.

"I don't need any reassurance when it comes to you," Ember said, smiling wider.

There was a flurry in Cinder's gut, but she immediately stomped it out and refocused. Despite Ember's expectations, getting nervous was irrational. Cinder couldn't fail at the thing she was best at. She *wouldn't*. They parted ways at the amphitheater's entrance and that little bug of anxiety calmed down. Ember climbed up, heading to the open seats; Cinder steered right, heading into the sparsely lit tunnels beneath them.

She ended up in an open room; sunlight streamed in from a big arch and she could hear the banter outside perfectly. The three other knights and someone in formal attire were standing around and chatting. When Trisha saw her, her eyes lit up. "Hey, Ashling. Excited to head straight to the infirmary?"

"Sure," Cinder mumbled.

Trisha frowned. "You're supposed to answer in kind."

The two other contestants seemed older than both of them. They were both men and one was balding. That meant he was experienced, certainly. It was unusual for knights to be titled late in life. The person in formal attire called for their attention and recited the rules. It was all pretty standard stuff — no casting spells before the fight and no fatal wounds; the one thing that was different was the fact everything else was allowed, considering they had black magic available. Cinder felt herself get more numbed out by the moment, as if becoming an automaton. As far as she was concerned, letting herself slip like that wasn't an issue. She did run better on muscle memory.

Finally, the referee walked across the arch and stood in the arena. Cinder crooked her neck to watch him as he greeted all the guests. He projected his voice out well. A shiver ran across her spine when he singled Ember out by name. Of course. It was silly. She'd already known she was there, but still. "To kick off today's events, Ma'am Ashling will duel Sir Nightgard!"

The name itself left a sour taste in Cinder's mouth. Still, she walked out into the open beside him, received by wild cheers from the audience. So many faces. That was for the best; the mix of garments and colors made it all that harder to spot Ember, as long as she focused on fighting. The knights took positions and unsheathed their swords. Cinder's sword felt familiar on her gloved hand, as if it'd been reshaped by it. Right, there was no way she'd lose. Having her own sword with her was like being at home. Sort of.

The balding man's small eyes were glued to her. His wrinkles made him look permanently angry — if he wasn't, in fact, angry. She took a deep breath. It wasn't about Ember's request. Losing to a Nightgard would be a disgrace. As soon as the referee signaled the start of the duel, her free hand slid across the blade as she cast the dispelling effect. It hardly took the blink of an eye, as used as she was to it.

Nightgard frowned at her, seemingly confused. He closed off his stance, choosing defense rather than offense. Of course, he wanted to draw Cinder out for a reason. She didn't have time for that nonsense. She had three of them to get through and the harsher she was, the better. She took the first step and immediately sped up in his direction, crossing the arena towards him. As expected, as soon as she raised her arm, a column of fire roared towards her open side. The sudden warmth fueled that spark of hot anger that had been kindled when she'd heard his name and she cut through the flames with her enchanted blade, dispersing them without a second thought.

His face had just dropped when she sprang up on him, lunging forward. He raised his own blade along with a haphazardly cast magical shield to parry, but his form was off. Too reliant on magic. Cinder's sword punctured his shield and grazed his armor as he dodged away at the last second.

After that, he threw some desperate spells towards her, but it was no use. As soon as he got through his denial, it became a mere sword fight — a matter of who was better at swordplay. He had a heavy hand, but a rigid wrist; his inability to match Cinder's speed and angles had him kneeling before her in no time, panting heavily as sweat ran down his face. Her sword pointing at his throat made that ember of anger turn into a roaring fire fed by pride and she smiled. While the referee declared her victory, Nightgard stood up and she reached out to shake his hand. He just walked away with his head down instead.

"The next challenger is Ma'am Mountview!" he said, soon followed by louder cheers. A feminine voice rose above the rest screaming "I LOVE YOU, TRISHA!" as Trisha walked to her position and waved to the audience. She had an easy smile and the ever confident expression.

"Don't think dusty old Connor Nightgard represents us," she said, unsheathing her sword. A sun ray caught on the blade and it glimmered. "I'm gonna bring it home."

"Right," Cinder said, stretching her arms.

"Don't make me look like a jackass," Trisha frowned, "Tease me back."

"Alright." She took a deep breath. "You'll lose."

Trisha chuckled. "That's a start. I'll take it."

They assumed their fighting stances and the referee set it off. Cinder re-enchanted her sword, hardly having time to finish it off as Trisha flew upon her, quick feet pushing the ground away from her in no time. She slashed up and Cinder parried it, making her jump back. She was strong enough to make Cinder's arm buckle. Trisha's smile turned wicked. "Since magic won't make a difference, let's play this clean, yeah?" she said.

Cinder stepped ahead wordlessly and, as Trisha raised her blade in preparation, planted one foot back firmly. Then, she pushed herself forward, thrusting towards Trisha's chest with all her might. The other knight's eyes widened and she quickly side-stepped, her forearm narrowly missing a stab wound. Before she could counter attack, though, Cinder raised her hand for a downward slash. Again, Trisha lifted her own sword, deciding to hold her ground. Wrong move. She was physically lighter than Cinder; besides, even if she were stronger, the momentum of the attack would overpower her.

Cinder slashed down with tense muscles, clashing blades without hesitation. Trisha's arm trembled and soon faltered; Cinder's sword pushed hers back and it hit her in the face, the edge opening a gash above her right eyebrow. Blood welled up thick, trickling down into her eye. She squinted at Cinder as she jumped back. Even so, she didn't give up. She stepped up to Cinder with renewed energy, sending her into defense momentarily. She was certainly quicker than the old man both in movement and wits, so keeping up with her actually troubled Cinder's breathing.

When Trisha blocked at an awkward angle, Cinder took the opportunity to quickly turn her sword and disarm her, its edge briefly meeting the leather of Trisha's gloves. Her sword

dropped to the sand with a hollow thud and Cinder slashed upwards, making her jump back yet again. Without the means to properly defend herself or attack, the fight became a test of resistance for Trisha. She could only evade for so long before Cinder's free hand grabbed her wrist and threw her down. She let out a gasp as her back hit the ground. Cinder stepped on her chest, keeping the end of her sword pointed at her. Trisha shut her bloody eye tight.

Two people in white attire jogged up to them, helping Trisha off the ground as the referee announced the results. They took her away, disappearing behind an arch. Just one more fight. Her dominant arm was already getting tired out. Fortunately, the last knight had a hopeless look when he came up to her and didn't put up much of a fight.

As the referee announced her final victory, the cheers grew again. He turned to Cinder with an excited smile and asked: "Any comments about today's results?"

She turned her gaze back to the audience, finding countless expectant faces. Her heart skipped a beat when somehow she spotted Ember, sitting in a privileged spot. She was close enough that Cinder could make out her smile. She pressed her lips shut for a second, remembering how Ember had asked her to make it humiliating. So, she cleared her throat and spoke up: "That was easier than I thought it'd be."

The cheers turned to booing. Cinder wasn't surprised to find she didn't feel any different about it. She just turned around and walked away, crossing the arch to the tunnels. In the very same room they'd talked before the duels, she found Trisha waiting for her. When she smiled at Cinder, she stopped dead in her tracks: the gash on her forehead was no longer a gash, but a perfectly healed scar. Had to be black magic. Cinder swallowed hard. There was a little bit of dry blood smeared on Trisha's face, like she'd tried to clean it, but a lot more on her armor. "What did I tell you?" she said, grinning, "There's no reason to gloat after you've already won."

Cinder's chest clenched and so did her fists. "Trisha..." she started, feeling the return of that cold bug of anxiety. "I'm sorry. For scarring you."

She touched the scar as if it was nothing. "Well, it makes me look tougher, doesn't it?" She laughed at Cinder's worried expression. "Seriously, it's alright. Besides, that fight really scratched my itch."

"Your itch."

"Yeah. To be honest, I didn't think you'd be so good," she said, gesturing with her gloved hands, "Figure you could teach me some of your tricks?"

"Some," Cinder conceded.

"Cindy!" Ember's familiar voice rose behind her and Cinder nearly jumped when her arms enveloped her from the back. "You did so great out there."

Trisha cocked her head, looking on with curious eyes. It made Cinder's cheeks burn. "Well, I'll see you at the training grounds," Trisha said before walking away.

Ember let her go and she turned to face her. She had a giddy smile, looking up at Cinder with wide shining eyes. "You were... dashing," she said, the enthusiasm in her voice mellowing out to a dreamy tone. Cinder's cheeks only burned more. "Now Howell can't question my need for you."

"Oh? I thought we were sending them a message," Cinder teased.

"Two birds with one stone." She sighed and averted her eyes. "I wish we could fight, too. I'm sorry I've been neglecting you. I swear it's not intentional."

"I know, Em." She looked around, making sure they were alone before touching her hand softly. "It's alright."

Ember smiled again. It felt hard to breathe. "And I'm sorry for being too forceful about the fight. I realize I pressured you."

"I'm fine with that. You can do it whenever," Cinder said.

"I'm serious, Cindy." She squeezed her hand.

It was useless to argue. She just stood there, letting the warmth of Ember's hand wash over her. Soon, it would become awkward and she'd have to let go. She'd have to let go and Ember would return to her duties. But not yet. Cinder was exhausted and the only thing she wanted was to lay in bed with Ember shoulder to shoulder like they used to.

They walked to the exit together, almost touching, but not really. Cinder's bliss was cut short when she saw Howell off to the side of the path, standing with a tall woman beside flowery bushes. He waved at them, inviting them closer. Naturally, Ember walked up to him and Cinder followed her, all too aware of her furrowed brow.

"Ember," he said smoothly, bowing his head, "And Miss Ashling. That was quite the show. Guess I was proven wrong." He smiled.

"Thanks," Cinder mumbled.

"There's someone I'd like you to meet," he paused, gesturing to the woman beside him. She was slightly taller than him and wore just as much silver along with a dark purple cape; there was a splint on her wrist. "This is Wyvern, our advisor and leader in all things magic. You might have heard of her."

An odd chill went down Cinder's nape. Ember smiled. "Of course. It's nice to finally meet you, Miss Wyvern."

"That's very kind of you, Princess." When Wyvern smiled, the wrinkles on the edges of her eyes became more evident. She turned her icy gaze on Cinder. "That was some world class dispelling."

"As I've said, Ashen knights are trained to excellence," Ember said, obviously proud.

Wyvern's smile turned to amusement. "Hmm. Dispelling like that takes an iron will, focus and is ultimately limited by your natural flame's capabilities." She pointed at Cinder, which offended her a little. It shouldn't. "They can't all be as good as her."



"They are all pushed to their limits," Ember said. Her eyes were not as cordial as her smile.

"Sounds ruthless," Wyvern chuckled. Her attention shifted back to Cinder. "I happen to be Umbral Star's Archmage. We'd love to have you duel our students as practice."

Before Cinder could even open her mouth, Ember let out a scoff. Cinder could tell by her face that it wasn't quite thought through. "Not happening," the princess said, "I'm afraid Cinder's only job is next to me."

Wyvern chuckled again. "Alright, alright. Don't worry. I won't steal your knight away, Princess."

Cinder saw Ember clench her fists and jaw. She touched her back softly, making her relax some.

"With that out of the way, could I invite you girls to brunch?" Howell asked, still cheery.

Ember swallowed hard and peeked at Cinder. Not finding anything in her expression, she put on a forced smile and answered: "Of course."

The rage from before came back, but Cinder was too tired to keep burning through it. It just felt like scattered ashes by then. She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Your Highness. Unfortunately, I'm quite tired." She bowed to him and her lips curled, thankfully obscured from his view.

"There's no need to apologize. You've earned your rest."

Ember's smile dropped. Though Cinder would enjoy the extra time with her, there was no way she'd endure an hour with Howell. She said her goodbyes and walked away with her head down. Upon getting to her room, she got out of her armor and boots and let herself drop on the bed, pulling the sheet over her head to hide away.

Her short and restless nap was interrupted by knocks on her and Ember's shared door. She got up and groggily wobbled her way to it, still only in her sweaty shirt and underwear. She opened it to find Ember's concerned face. She let herself in as soon as the door was open. "Cindy... Are you alright?"

Cinder rubbed her eyes. "Yeah, why?"

"That thing with Wyvern. I didn't mean that you can't do other things." She took a deep breath, rubbing her arm. Did she really think that had bothered Cinder? "It's just that the Lunarian army is heavily reinforced by Umbral Star students and I can't have you help-"

"Em," Cinder stopped her, holding her by the shoulders. "I know."

"Oh. Alright." She relaxed under Cinder's firm hold. "But you seem down."

"I'm just tired."

"Really? You can talk to me. I feel like we're growing distant." Her eyes were wide, almost pleading.

"Also, I can't stand that guy."

Ember sighed. "I'm sorry. You're homesick, aren't you?"

"No."

"Are you trying to spare me the guilt?" She smiled meekly.

"I'm *not* homesick. There's nothing to feel guilty about." Cinder let her shoulders go. Her hands had become a little tingly. "My only tie to home is you," she said in a near whisper.

"And I haven't been spending time with you at all," Ember said, casting her gaze down. Her tone dropped as well.

"Em. That's not your fault. You've always said duties come first." Ember didn't answer. Cinder held her arms open, trying to ignore that familiar pain in her chest. "Come here." Ember obeyed instantly, touching her body to Cinder, her chin on her clavicle. Cinder hugged

her tight, one hand on the back of her head. Her hair was soft. "It's alright. You don't ever have to worry about me."

"But I love you, Cindy," she murmured.

*You're my love.* The word hurt much more knowing that. "I know. I love you too."

When she said that, nausea struck her. Somehow, it felt wrong to be in the know when Ember wasn't.

After the duels, things went back to the unpleasant norm. Cinder killed time at the training grounds and, like she'd promised, Trisha turned up there. She trotted up to her, as happy-go-lucky as always despite the new permanent mark on her face. "Hey, Ashling. Ready to pay up?"

"What?" Cinder frowned, stretching as she talked.

"You said you'd teach me some tricks." She smiled eagerly.

"Ah." She stopped. "I don't know what I could teach you. You're pretty good."

"But you still beat me. Say, your dispelling is great. How about that?"

Cinder pictured Ember's anger at Wyvern's request. "Sorry. That's the one thing I won't go into."

Trisha furrowed her brow. "Well, okay... How about some practice duels then?"

"Sure." Having some company wasn't that bad after all. Thus, they geared up with wooden swords and took opposite spots. Cinder swung the practice sword; its weight felt off in her hands. She sighed. "I don't know what to tell you. I just noticed that you're fast, but you still default to parrying instead of evading. That's what led to this," she tapped her eyebrow right where Trisha had gotten hit. "Especially a downward slash from someone heavier than you."

"Alright. Let's try that." She still smiled, unaffected by the criticism. Time flew by nicely while they had at each other, Trisha attempting to dodge all of Cinder's attacks and counter them while she regained her composure.

When they were both too tired to keep going, they sat next to each other on a bench, passing water around. Somehow, Trisha's head ended up on Cinder's shoulder. Ignoring the sudden rush in her bloodstream, Cinder closed her eyes and breathed in deep. Again, soap and lavender. And sweat. "Ashling?" Trisha called, nuzzling her shoulder subtly.

Cinder shivered. "Yeah?"

"What's your first name?"

She had to laugh a little. "You don't know?"

"From knight to knight, last name only was good enough. But then it got too awkward to ask," Trisha said, shrugging.

"It's Cinder."

"Cinder. You're fun to hang out with."

That rush turned to blushing. "Thanks," Cinder said, "You too."

"I was wondering... Would you like to go out sometime?"

Suddenly, Trisha's cheek on her shoulder felt burning hot and Cinder's breathing faltered. Her arms started tingling upwards from her fingertips and she hated the feeling. "Go out?"

"Yeah. I could show you my favorite spots. There's a bar out in town that always has live music."

Go out. It had been years since Cinder had last been that far apart from Ember. If she went to such a place, would she like it? She wasn't sure. She tried to picture it: the familiar buzz of alcohol, lively music and the smile of a pretty girl next to her. Something squeezed

her heart. "I'm sorry. I'm on duty. I can't exactly take time off like that," she said at last, keeping her eyes on a wall opposite of them.

At that point, Trisha lifted her face. Cinder could feel her expectant gaze on her. "You worry too much. You need to have a life of your own. Princess Greyland's perfectly safe here." She smiled softly. "Besides, she's been spending a lot of time away from you anyway."

It was like Trisha had stuck her finger on an open wound. Cinder bit her lower lip and held her hands together. "Actually..." she started, then paused to gather courage to say it. "There's someone else I like." Even if that wasn't the case, she'd probably be just as nervous. Sure, Trisha was good looking and cool. All that. But she was also new and different.

"Oh." Trisha straightened herself out, putting a little bit of distance between them. Cinder was surprised to feel disappointed by it. "I see. Are they back in the Valleys?"

"...Yeah." The lie just made her more bitter.

"Forget I asked, then. Can we hang out still?"

"Sure." Cinder tried to smile at her properly, but her facial muscles felt weakened.

As had become the norm, Cinder was lying in Ember's bed while she removed her makeup after dinner. That was one of the only certain bits of time they had. Ember would always tell her about her day and the conversation somehow always reverted to Howell. She'd been spending too much time with him. Cinder would normally be able to lend her an ear, but that night her stomach churned and her thoughts grew restless; hearing his name only made it all worse.

"Cindy? Are you okay? You've been awfully quiet. Quieter than usual," Ember said, turning to her. One of her eyes still had eyeliner on.

"Yeah."

"I feel like there's something you aren't telling me," she said, lifting her brow in worry.

Cinder hugged a pillow against her chest, bending over it a little. She thought she might puke. Was there even a point in telling Em? Then again, she couldn't look her in the eyes without thinking about it. Her throat was tight, but she managed to squeeze the words out: "Trisha asked me out today."

"The knight?" Cinder nodded. Ember smiled weakly. "Oh, wow. That's great. What did you say?"

"I said I have to guard you."

Ember's smile dropped and she stood from her chair, throwing her hands out. Her voice rose up a note. "*Cinder!* You can do your own things! You don't have to worry about me so much." Because Cinder didn't answer, she continued, eyes wide: "I think going out with someone would do you good. You're all alone here and-"

"Why are you trying to push me onto someone else?" Cinder said, frowning. It came out of bitterness and her heart faltered when she realized the words she'd used.

Ember froze. Her hands fell to the sides of her body. She blinked. "Someone else?"

Cold waves ran over Cinder. Without her armor, she felt even more exposed. "I know. You confessed to me," she said, her voice dying out near the end, "And you don't even remember it." With her face buried in the pillow, she couldn't see Ember's reaction. There was a knot in her guts.

It took a while, but Ember's words came up soft: "The farewell party."

"Yeah."

"I thought I'd dreamt it." She sighed and Cinder heard her weight fall back on the chair. "Gods. I'm so, so sorry Cindy. That wasn't fair."

"Don't be sorry."

"No. You need to stop excusing my actions. I need to learn to let you go. I shouldn't even have made you come along."

Cinder sat up, her stomach suddenly on fire. It burnt all the way up to her face and only grew in intensity when she saw Ember's glistening eyes; her hands were on her cheeks and she looked like she might cry. "What if I don't want you to let me go? Have you ever thought about that?"

Slowly, Ember's hands left her face. Her cheeks were red as well. Her lips parted. "What?" she mumbled.

"I'm obviously in love with you too. So don't fucking push me onto someone else when you clearly don't want that." She gripped the bedsheet under her.

"But we can't..."

"I'm just tired of going around it. I'm tired of seeing you act like that guy is not so bad. I'm tired of you acting like it's okay." Cinder's eyes stung and she realized she must look pathetic. Her voice cracked and it only made her want to cry more.

"I have to marry him." She averted her eyes, holding onto her own arm. That meek pose didn't fit her.

"You don't have to pretend to be fine with it." A familiar rush burned through her and her whole body felt tense.

"If I don't, I'll be miserable."

Cinder stood up and threw the pillow back to the bed. "Don't be miserable. Be angry. You shouldn't be in this predicament in the first place. If Laurel hadn't fucked everything up, we'd be eating strawberry shortcake and having as many Cimber holidays as we wanted." Before she realized it, tears were rolling down her face. She got rid of them as fast as she could with the back of her hand.

Ember's lip quivered. Her head dropped and she hid her face behind her hands. "Being angry won't solve anything." She sighed. "You were right. I *am* jealous of him. Because he

gets to throw everything away to be with that woman without a care in the world." Before Cinder could say anything, she added: "But I'm not like him."

"Ember, I..." If only her voice would stop cracking. She swallowed hard. "I'll always be with you. I just want you to stop lying."

When she looked up, what remained of her eye makeup had been ruined, streaming down her cheek. "I love you, Cindy. More than anything. But if I get comfortable with that, I won't have the will to go on." She pressed her lips shut, crying silently.

The vision made Cinder's ribcage feel too small for her to breathe. "You're not merchandise. You shouldn't be used as coin."

"That's just how it is." Ember breathed in. "That's why I really thought it would be good for you to go out with Trisha. This can go away. Your feelings. Romance is not supposed to be such a huge part of life," her lips trembled as she spoke, "It doesn't have to be end all be all."

"It might as well be, because I'll never give up on you," Cinder said, balling up her fists.

Somehow, Ember smiled. "Cindy... I never knew you were such a hopeless romantic."

"It's not about that," she stuttered, blushing, "You've always been the best to me."

Ember turned her face down. "I just don't want you to suffer. We can never be together."

Cinder deflated. All the heat that had been building up inside her sizzled out. "I don't care."

Em rubbed under her eye, smearing the makeup even more. Then, she got up and slowly walked up to Cinder. She stood close enough for her to feel the warmth that came off her. Her hands found Cinder's shoulders and she held them tight as she tiptoed, lifting her



face to her. Like that, Cinder could smell her hair perfectly and dive into her eyes. "Just once. I want to know what it feels like," Ember whispered.

Cinder's breathing got caught up and her eyes widened. Her whole body lit up again and she nodded, unable to form a simple word. She bent down slightly and Ember took her lips to hers. They were buttery soft and melted into hers; when her tongue brushed against Cinder's, she could swear her heart had sped up too much. She embraced Ember and pulled her body closer to hers, feeling each of her curves through their clothes. Everything hurt and tingled and she realized she was crying harder than before.

Sooner than it should have happened, Ember pulled back and looked up at her. Her pupils were wide and she gave her a melancholic smile; then, she wiped Cinder's tears away with her thumbs. "We should stop," she whispered, her voice breaking. Ember let her go and Cinder realized she had to do the same. She did, though it hurt.

"Was it...?"

"It was good," Ember said, still smiling, "The best. Thank you."

"Stop. It was..." she paused, trying not to snifle, "... the best for me too."

There was a moment of silence. They stood around awkwardly. "Goodnight, Cindy," Ember said at last.

The shock of the words made Cinder simmer down again. "Goodnight," she mumbled. She waited, trying to find any sign that Ember didn't mean it, but all she got was the same melancholic smile. So, she turned and left. When she laid in bed, she'd never felt so hollow and full at the same time. She cried some more, overflowing.

#### 4

After that, Ember's time for her seemed to become even shorter, like she was avoiding her. There was no more sitting around and chatting at night — no more being alone in the same room. Whenever their gazes met, Cinder's whole body would go up in flames, her chest

tightening up. Ember's eyes looked invariably sad, which only contributed to the burning. Sometimes, she thought she'd cry in public. So, she cycled fast through a range of emotions, always ending up in shame.

Then finally, there was a knock on their door one day after lunch. The butterflies in Cinder's stomach were suddenly alive again and she jumped up to answer it. They died out a little when she didn't find a smile in Ember's face. "Hey, Cindy," she said, "I thought you might want to come with me today." Upon closer inspection, there were light bags under her eyes. Cinder wanted to pull her into a hug, but felt like it wouldn't be appropriate.

"Is that okay?"

"We'll just be discussing the engagement party, so it's okay." Her voice dropped a little.

A warning lit up in Cinder's mind, pushing aside the gloom for a moment. "If you're discussing the party, does that mean you're done with the marriage details?" she asked, to which Ember just nodded. "Exactly how much of our country are we giving up?"

She didn't mean for it to come out as an accusation, but Ember sighed and looked down. "Technically, my voice has the same weight. Technically," she mumbled. "You know, I'll fight every step of the way."

"I'm sorry. That... doesn't really matter right now," Cinder said, pausing to clear her throat. It was hard to speak.

"Of course it does."

"No. You're hurting."

Ember let out a bitter chuckle. "You think that matters more?"

At least she hadn't denied it. "To me, yeah."

The Princess shook her head and went quiet for a while. "That's just the problem," she said softly. Before Cinder could ask her what she meant, she continued: "Well, are you coming?"

"Of course."

She regretted it almost instantly. Her agreement led to hours of standing against a wall and watching a bunch of people sitting around discussing the engagement party; as Ember tried to convince Howell that mixing gold and silver for the decorations was an aesthetic nightmare, Cinder wanted to peel her own cheeks off. When he talked about the speech section, her stomach burned with acid. It felt like it'd tear a hole through her when they got to the dance. First, they'd slowdance. She pictured his hands on Ember's waist and that acid crawled up to her throat.

The whole time, Ember was sitting with her back turned to her. She wondered if she was smiling. Probably. She was good at keeping appearances. Had she wanted Cinder there for support? Did having her stand around really help? There was no way she just wanted her to hear all that. It'd be unnecessarily cruel. She caught up with her while they exited the meeting room. As they walked, she bent towards her so their conversation could be more private. "Princess," she called with caution, waiting for her worn smile to change.

Ember turned that smile on her. "Thanks for coming. I arranged some shortcake for today's dessert." She averted her eyes. "Not strawberry, but the best they could do."

The triviality of it came out of left field, but still warmed her heart up. "Thank you," she said after overcoming her brief stun. "Are you alright?"

"I-" she started and immediately interrupted herself. "I will be."

"Would you like to hang out? In your room."

"I think it's best if we don't," Ember said. She held her breath, unable to look up at Cinder.

Her stomach dropped. "Okay."

The next time Ember came around asking if she wanted to come see some more party planning, she actually knew what it entailed. "I'm sorry. I just can't stand the topic," she said.

Ember's face dropped. "My engagement?"

Cinder tightened her hold on the door between them. "Ember," she started, letting the weight of her full name fall, "Why do you think I'd want to hear about the details of you marrying someone else?" Ember's eyes were wide and humid and guilt stung Cinder. She took a deep breath. "I'd do anything to spend time with you, but I'm not a masochist."

"Oh. I thought you were just bored." When Cinder scoffed, she smiled. "So you're the jealous type."

"I'm not jealous." Cinder's face heated up and she crossed her arms. "It's only natural. I don't get how you could push me off to someone else."

"Trisha?" Ember asked and she nodded. "I just want you to be happy."

It hit Cinder like a slap. She recovered when the thought hit her: "You won't be happy with him."

Her shoulders dropped. "It can't be helped." Slowly, she took Cinder's hand with both of hers and just worried at her fingers. Hers felt smooth against her skin and Cinder watched on. Ember's fringe covered her eyes and she couldn't see them anymore. They spent a while like that, the waves of warmth from Ember's delicate touch bringing about an odd type of sadness. At last, Ember let a heavy breath go. "I have to get going."

"You'll be okay." She had to fight the knot in her throat to say it.

Ember smiled a little, raising her face. Her eyes were swollen, Cinder noticed. "Is it bad that I was happy about your jealousy?"

The butterflies fluttered up and Cinder knew she was blushing again. "It's a little fucked," she said.

The Princess laughed. She brought Cinder's hand up to her face, rubbing her tender cheek on her knuckles. "It's bad, huh."

Fuck. Cinder bit her lower lip. "You're sending me mixed signals," she said. When Ember shot her a puzzled look, she added: "It's like you *want* me to put you up against the wall and kiss you."

As soon as the words came out of her mouth, she froze, realizing the weight of them. Ember's lips parted and her eyes widened. "This is why we can't be alone," she said, dropping Cinder's hand. "Bye, Cindy." She stepped back and closed the door between them, eyeing her all the while. Cinder leaned forward and let her head rest on the door softly. Fuck.

Cinder took her gloom out at the training grounds. Time went by faster when her thoughts turned to mere abstractions and she focused on her body. She was so absorbed that it took her a while to notice Trisha on her peripheral vision. "Hey, Cinder," she called, possibly not for the first time. Her brow was slightly furrowed. "You should take it easy."

"I'm taking it easy."

"You look like you're murdering someone in your mind," Trisha said, pointing at her own temple.

"That's how I take it easy."

"Let me take you for a stroll so you can let your legs do the thinking instead."

"My fists are doing the thinking," Cinder said.

"Don't be obnoxious." Trisha tugged at her arm and Cinder decided to just let it go. Trisha led her through the castle's pathways and the fresh air chilled the sweat on Cinder's skin. They ended up in a garden that behaved more like a maze, neatly trimmed bushes dictating their trajectory. "This is bound to calm you down," Trisha said.

Cinder looked around. Everything was carefully arranged. "It's not like our gardens back home."

"Are those better, too?" Trisha asked, pouring in obvious sarcasm.

"They're all wild flowers and herbs. We don't-" she paused, her eyes meeting a red dress when she lifted her face. On another corner of the short maze, Ember walked with Howell. They had their arms linked. Cinder froze, her throat burning. Ember's eyes met hers and her jaw dropped; she meekly raised her hand to wave at Cinder. Despite the burning, Cinder waved back. Howell looked on inquisitively. It lasted but a few seconds before they were gone.

"There it is. The bitterness again," Trisha said, smiling and pointing at Cinder's face. "Is Prince Duskhand the one you were murdering in your mind?" The accusation made Cinder grow alert; she looked around and shushed Trisha. The gesture only made Trisha's eyes shine more. "The one you like is Princess Greyland, isn't it?" A sudden cold overcame Cinder and she lost control of her expression. Trisha laughed. "Oh, that's nothing unheard of. A royal having an affair with their guard. So convenient."

"That's not how any of it works," Cinder said, almost whispering. She clenched her jaw.

"How come?"

"She's marrying him."

"So what? They make a couple kids and you get her the rest of the time. The standard arrangement." Trisha shrugged, the same easygoing smile as always on her face.

Cinder's lips curled. Her stomach churned and she had to stop again. Trisha halted a step ahead, looking back at her in confusion. "Don't talk about her like that," Cinder said. The words tasted acidic.

"Oof. Okay. Feels like I touched a nerve." Trisha raised her hands.

Letting out a sigh, Cinder brushed her fringe back and rested her forehead on her hand for a moment. "I'm not in the mood for this," she declared, turning on the heels of her boots and leaving Trisha behind.

"Go get a drink," Trisha shouted. Cinder glared at her over her shoulder. She stomped her way out of the stupid maze and hid in her room again.

Once again, Ember knocked on their door and Cinder answered it to find her looking quite down. The Princess let herself into her room, walking up to the bed and sitting there with her head down and her hands on her lap. "Howell's onto us," she mumbled.

"What?"

"He said I can have as many affairs as I want as long as it doesn't result in an illegitimate child," she said, unable to look at Cinder, "And he even said 'of course' at the end of it."

Cinder nodded, thinking of Trisha's unsolicited advice. "That's just how these Lunarians are."

"It's fucked up," Ember agreed. She held onto the bedsheets under her and looked off to the side. "But it's not like... I'm not serious about you." Cinder's heart skipped a beat and she went still, stunned. Ember stood up and took a deep breath. "It's not like I wouldn't marry you if I could, so... Is that so bad?" When she raised her face to Cinder, her eyes were glistening.

Her chest hurt. "No, it's not so bad," Cinder whispered.

"Then... What was it you said you'd do to me again?" Nonchalantly, she took a step to the side and leaned against the wall.

Cinder's heart raced and she felt lightheaded. "Put you up against the wall and kiss you?" Ember subtly licked her lips and nodded. Without giving it another thought, Cinder closed the distance between them and pushed her back to the wall; Ember's little gasp made

her guts go hot. She gripped her by the thighs, her fingers digging into soft skin as she lifted her. Ember enveloped her waist with her legs, her dress skirting up and showing more skin. Cinder went dizzy, but kept a firm hold on her, their chests glued to each other. "Would you really marry me?" she whispered.

Ember was warm and smelled like star anise. Like tea. "You have no idea, Cindy," she whispered back, putting her arms around Cinder's neck and pulling her towards her.

She gave in, lulled by the pull of Ember's lips and words. She was even hotter upon such intimate touch, her tongue feeling like it might burn Cinder's; her lips were moist and slid between hers easily. When Cinder gripped her thigh tighter, she let out a tiny moan. She sounded so... vulnerable. And adorable. Cinder's heart might as well explode. Ember's hands under her shirt didn't help at all. She carried Ember to bed and laid her down with slow, measured force; all the while, Ember looked at her with wide eyes, still hugging her by the neck. It was like something had been torn from her. Too cute.

Cinder sat beside her, bending down so Ember could still hug her. "I never thought you'd like me too," Cinder said, raising her hand to caress her cheek.

Ember leaned into her touch. "Why wouldn't I?" She smiled.

"Aside from how gorgeous you are..." She sighed and averted her eyes. Hearing her own heartbeat was throwing her off. "You only like women. I thought you might not see me as enough of a woman."

Ember gave her ear a light pull, making Cinder wince. "That's ridiculous. You're exactly my type. You're pretty. Dashing. You can carry me. You listen to every little thing I say. Above everything else..." she paused to brush Cinder's hair out of her face. Her expression was so loving that Cinder almost cried instantly. "You're gentle. What's there not to like?"

"I'm not that gentle."



"If you're talking about your anger," Ember started, immediately pausing to touch her finger to Cinder's chest, "It's okay. I know it comes from hurt."

Cinder decided not to mention it. She laid down with her, carefully placing her arm over Ember's torso. Ember accepted it without a word. "How long have you liked me for?"

Ember mm-ed and closed her eyes, scrunching her face up. The silliness of it made Cinder smile. "Once when we were like, sixteen, you sort of picked me up by the waist to help me reach a shelf. Then I felt all sorts of ways and thought that might not be normal." She opened her eyes and blushed at Cinder's furrowed brow. "Okay, it made me wet."

Cinder's cheeks burned too. She hid her face with her hands and took a deep breath. "Gods. I'm sorry. That sounds like it must have been inappropriate of me."

"No, no. It happened really organically. And I thought it was... hot." As soon as silence settled in, Ember broke it by laughing.

Smiling, Cinder grabbed her by the waist and pulled her closer. "So just me holding you is enough to make you wet?"

She felt Ember tremble under her hand. "You didn't say how long *you've* liked me for," she said, casting a dirty look Cinder's way.

Cinder kissed her cheek briefly. It was quite warm. "You've always been nice to me. I fell pretty fast."

"I was *normal* to you." Ember sighed. "You were just such a sad teen." She laid her hand on Cinder's chest, caressing it.

"Come on. Is that how you saw me?" Cinder furrowed her brow and tried not to let the memories come on.

"I mean, yeah. Your only thing was fighting. Everything else? Cardboard. Completely lost and misadjusted. It was sad. Sad to see." Ember took a deep breath and nudged Cinder, trying to nestle in her arms. "But still so sweet."

"Now I feel ridiculous."

Ember laughed. "Why? You're a grown up now. We're both grown ups."

"Am I all that different now?"

"Well... You're grumpy, but you're not all doom and gloom anymore. You've always acted differently towards me, though. Maybe because you've liked me all this time," Ember said. Cinder could feel her cheeks rise when she smiled.

She hugged Ember tight, letting her rest her head on her chest. Having her safe in her arms, their legs tangled, was all she could ask for. Just for that moment, she could forget the circumstances. "I have," she agreed.

"And you've grown even hotter," Ember said suddenly, her voice husky. It sent a shiver down Cinder's spine along with instant heat. "It's like you get hotter every year."

"Really? I feel like I look manlier the older I get," Cinder mumbled, thinking back to the day Ember had caught her shaving. If it weren't for those feelings, she'd be able to melt away hearing something like that.

"No... You've gotten more muscular. Taller. You made me love muscular women," Ember continued, lowering her voice to a whisper. Her hand rose to Cinder's neck, her fingers tracing it in an almost threatening manner, like hunger. "I love that you can lift me like that and press me up against the wall like I'm nothing. Do it more."

"If you say things like that..." Cinder pressed her eyes shut. How could Ember say that kind of thing so easily when it made Cinder aware of her whole body? In fact, she'd never thought words like those would ever leave Ember's lips. Small, tender, polite Ember. She shuddered.

One of Ember's hands found its way under her shirt, feeling her abdomen up. Cinder contracted it in hopes it would help keep herself in check. Ember's mocking giggle made her face burn. "I've been hot for you all this time. It's okay. It was okay when you got hard while

I was doing your makeup, too." Cinder froze and Ember's lips grazed her ear; she was sure she was smiling. "You did, didn't you?"

"I'm sorry, Em. It was impossible not to. You were all over me..."

"I said it's fine. If I'd had some guts, I'd have kissed you then. I only had the guts to act coy and sit on your lap."

Cinder bit her lip, remembering the tenderness of Ember's thighs and the heat between her legs, the smell of her hair around her; the same smell she could feel right then. "So you did it on purpose," she said.

Ember's fingertips were dangerously close to the hem of her pants. At least she still had her belt on. Her touch was hot on Cinder's anxiety-chilled skin. "I know, that's dirty. I'm sorry. I've been stealing bits of you whenever I can. A glance. Hugs. Making you tighten my corset so I could feel the thrill of your eyes on me. It's fucked up, I know."

"Fuck," Cinder mumbled, opening her eyes to look down at her mischievous smile. "I've felt so guilty for looking at you."

"Looking at me how?" Ember asked, smiling more.

"All of you. But I can't stop myself from looking at your cleavage. That nightgown of yours kills me." Cinder raised her knees, a little embarrassed. Some things were really inevitable. "But it was like... you only wore it around me because you trusted me, and I was breaching your trust by... You know."

Ember's sweet, low laughter startled her. "No, I wore it to show you my boobs."

Cinder furrowed her brow and found Ember's wandering hand, holding it tight where it was. "You're such an act. You have no clue how much you mess with me." She was taken aback by how rough her own voice sounded.

Before she could continue chastising Ember, her lips were on hers, soon forcing them apart to make way for her tongue. Somehow, Ember wound up in her lap again, giggling

when she felt her erection. "We could just make up for our lost time instead," she whispered. It was like she was laughing at Cinder's red face.

"Doesn't it bother you? I mean..."

"Not at all. I've been fantasizing about you," she said. She grinded on Cinder's lap, making her tense up and hold Ember by the waist so she'd stay still. "Though I don't even know what a dick looks like."

"If you jump me like this all of a sudden, Ember, I can't... I can't keep my head straight on."

"That's good," Ember whispered, lowering herself to kiss Cinder's neck, sending a new wave of heat down her body. "I want you to make the face you make when we fight."

"Did you get pleasure from fighting me, too?" she asked, raising her hand to gently grab her by the nape and make her face her. Ember gasped and parted her lips, promptly making her dick throb. Was it so easy to affect Cinder?

"I love your serious look. I know I shouldn't, but I love when you get angry and overprotective of me. I imagine," she said, lowering her voice again, her eyes narrowing, "you fucking me that rough."

It pulsed again. Cinder gripped her neck tighter, making her smile become delighted. It tore through Cinder's mind, planting itself firmly in the back of her head; there'd be no forgetting that look on Ember's face. "We can't do that."

"There are many ways to have sex still." She giggled. Damn. Her *voice*. "Just make me cum, Cindy. I can't take it anymore."

Cinder pulled her down and kissed her, trying to calm down her own blood flow. Ember didn't help though, biting at her lip and making sure to taste her tongue as much as possible. Cinder ripped her away, watching her catch her breath. "Alright. Take your panties off and sit on my face."

It was Ember's turn to blush. "That's very specific."

She focused on Ember's eyes, her wide pupils and long lashes. A deceptively innocent look. "I love your thighs. You're not the only one with fantasies." As Ember just lifted her dress wordlessly, her hands shaking a little, Cinder added: "And don't just hover... *sit*."

That night, Ember slept in her arms and Cinder almost cried upon being able to hold her for so long. There, with her almost naked body glued to hers, she realized Ember was hers in a way that she was no one else's. Sure, she may marry Howell and have children with him, and though that made Cinder's stomach churn, Ember would never look at him with the lust she'd just directed at her; she'd never happily sit on his face and suffocate him with her thighs, moaning his name and trembling. So Cinder held her close, unbothered by her lingering taste in her mouth.

She woke to Ember's bare chest pressing against hers. It was immediately enough to make her blood pressure rise. All too aware of Cinder's reaction, Ember smiled. "Cindy," she called, making it sound extra sweet, "Will you come to the meeting this time? For me?"

Cinder let out a tiny sigh, trying to keep her eyes on Ember's. "Of course," she conceded.

Gingerly, Ember caressed her face and planted a kiss on her lips. "Get dressed, then." Her smile grew into a grin. "Though I do prefer your current attire."

Cinder pulled the bedsheet up to her chest, hiding her bare skin as much as possible. Her face was hot. "Stop. Don't get me going." She closed her eyes and let her breath go. "Get dressed, Princess."

"Not work mode already! Seriously?" Ember shouted, banging her fists on her chest.

"Go on, now," Cinder replied, unphased.

Ember kissed her and she melted, loosening her grip on the sheet. "You're lying to me," she said, looking at Cinder with that sly grin, "You want me to stay."

"If it were up to me, you'd never be out of my sight."

With that, Ember laughed and finally got up. She collected her clothes from the floor. "You're so dramatic! I'll be with you again in a second," she said, soon disappearing beyond their shared door. She didn't bother closing it.

Getting dressed didn't take too long for Cinder. She finished in time to walk into Ember's room while she did her makeup; she leaned on the wall and watched with her arms crossed. Ember caught her reflection in the mirror and smiled, making her heart beat faster. "I should have figured out earlier that you liked me," she said. When Cinder raised her brow, she added: "It's the way you look at me."

"I've always been yours," Cinder agreed, closing her eyes solemnly for a moment.

Ember let out a low laugh. "Oh, we're so fucked up."

"Why?"

"This is all wrong. But I like it."

"Then there's nothing wrong with it."

"If you say so," Ember mumbled, throwing her hair back. She threw the piece of charcoal she'd used for her eyeshadow aside. "Let's go, then."

As they walked the hallways with their arms linked, that clandestine happiness of a secret relationship flooded Cinder again. Even as the final details of the engagement party were discussed during the meeting, all she could do was watch Ember's lips move as she spoke to Howell and picture the way they'd enveloped her cock the night before, tightening around the head. That made it easier to withstand the meeting, though she'd prefer being able to keep her thoughts and body in check. Well, Ember could speak to Howell all she wanted to. Cinder's heart was resting easier after all that.

When it was finally done, Ember excused herself politely and walked up to Cinder with a knowing smile. "You manage to withstand it this time?" she asked.

"Barely."

"We could go for breakfast together," she said, her hands behind her back. She swayed a little, her dress going along with the soft movement. Cute.

"We could..." Cinder started, shutting her mouth when she saw Howell approach.

He stood beside Ember, just as smiley as her. "Good morning, Miss Ashling," he said, as smoothly as usual. His sharp eyes always made anger spark in her stomach. He nodded to Ember. "I was about to invite you to breakfast, though I suppose I should invite your knight, too. I know you two share... a special bond." He grinned, narrowing his eyes.

His stare stabbed through her. If only she could, she'd stab him back. Before Ember could answer, Cinder said: "Let's do just that."

As Howell led them through the castle halls, Ember looked over her shoulder to cast a quizzical look to Cinder, who didn't respond. The Prince's taunting grin still burned inside her. They ended up sitting at a small round table in a cozy solarium, which meant Cinder was looking straight at him, too close for comfort. Under her glare, he simply smiled and shrugged her off, preferring to make small talk with Ember. The delicate silver chains that hung from his shoulders moved as he gestured, the tiny stars that dangled from them reflecting sunlight. His fingers were long and delicate. Cinder's hands were brutish by comparison. Worst of all, he kept that taunting smile all the while. Seeing Ember smile in return made her burn brighter.

"Since you're going to be right in Ember's shadow for the foreseeable future, I thought it would be best if we all got along," Howell said, focusing on Cinder. He sipped his tea ever so calmly. "I understand she's very fond of you. Maybe your presence can make her happier."

Ember eyed her cautiously. Cinder couldn't help but let out a bitter smile. "You have such a good soul," she said, tilting her head.

He chuckled, eyes narrow again. "I'm not interested in such moral qualifiers. You'll find instead," he paused to place his tea cup on the table gracefully, "that I'm a very practical man. I'm not bothered by the volatile affections Volcana's people experience." His eyes were dark and cold enough to ice Cinder's insides. "It's in my interest that you are happy, Miss Ashling, because that will mean my wife is happy. Not because I'm a good soul, but because happiness is stability. Do you understand?" He casually ate a piece of cake, smiling sweetly at her though his eyes remained sharp.

The onslaught of words had stunned Cinder. She just nodded, shamefully eager to get his eyes off her. It worked. Howell turned to Ember, leaving her with that smoldering anger. "If you'll excuse me, I have another appointment to get to. I'll leave you two be," he said softly, standing up. "Forgive my frankness."

Once he was out, it was like the sunlight was finally warm again. Cinder clenched her jaw. "You made him say the quiet part out loud," Ember said, apparently finding humor in it.

"I don't like him."

"You look angry." Ember pulled her chair closer to Cinder's, grinning. "Why? Would you prefer it if you were taking something from him, instead of accepting what he offers you?"

"No. I'd prefer it if you were completely mine." She averted her eyes.

Ember giggled. "That's exactly what I said. Hey... You can have as much of me as you want tonight." The heat of her hand appeared on Cinder's thigh. "But please make the face you're making right now."



