



Cinder's Adventure

Get Me to the Wedding!

IN WHICH READERS CHOOSE THE STORY
AND DETERMINE THE FATE OF
THEIR FAVORITE CYBORG



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Reader Letter

Dear Reader,

Warning! This story contains spoilers for

The Lunar Chronicles

The Renegades Trilogy

Heartless

It also contains references to *Gilded* and *Instant Karma*, but those chapters aren't quite as spoilery ...

If you have not yet read the above works, proceed at your own risk!

Also, I would like to officially state that nothing included within this tale should be considered canon to any of the above works.

Happy reading! Make good choices! *wink*

Marissa

CAST OF CHARACTERS

From the Lunar Chronicles

Cinder (also called Linh Cinder)

Cress

Scarlet

Winter

Iko

Jacin

Prince Kai

Kinney

Queen Levana

Peony

Rikan

Captain Thorne

Torin

Wolf

From the Renegades Trilogy

Adrian, also called Sketch

Max

Magpie

Nova

From *Instant Karma*

Ari

Jude

Quint/Quintonian

Pru

From *Heartless*

Cath

Hatta

The Jabberwock

Jest

Mary Ann

Peter Peter

From *Gilded*

The Erlking (also called the Alder King)

Fricz and Nickel (twins)

Gerdrut

Hans

Serilda

Chapter 1

Cinder sat on a tufted chair in the private quarters in New Beijing Palace, ignoring her reflection in the large mirror that loomed over the vanity before her. It wasn't that she was displeased with her reflection, even though she never felt *quite* like herself after the retinue of servants had gotten ahold of her, and today's regime was perhaps the most intensive progression of pastes, creams, and cosmetics she'd ever endured. Iko had finally stepped in—she could always tell when Cinder was at the end of her tolerance level for these things—and had shooed the retainers away before doing Cinder's hair herself. No ponytail today, she'd insisted. Instead, Cinder's brown hair had been done up in a classic twist, ornamented with a single white peony flower. Homage to the sister she wished could have been there.

But Cinder wasn't thinking about Peony or the past or what could have or should have been. Not at that moment. She was staring at her engagement ring. A single ruby set into a golden band, framed by a ring of diamonds. The ring had a history that sometimes left her feeling panicked when she stopped to think about it. It had been passed down through the Eastern Commonwealth's royal family for generations, from empress to empress—worn by Kai's great-grandmother and grandmother and mother—and now it had made its way to *her*.

There were times when she could hardly breathe for fear that she might lose it somehow.

But even those fears weren't what was swirling through her thoughts now.

No, she was admiring the way the jewels glittering against her steel fingers made her cyborg hand seem almost ... elegant.

In a few short hours, she would be married.

As the lights from the room caught on the gems and sent a kaleidoscope of sparkles across the mirror, she wondered what Kai was doing now. Probably being hassled by attendants, as well, though it never bothered him like it did her. Was he as nervous as she was?

She tore her gaze from the ring and met her own eyes in the reflection.

Yes—she was nervous, but she was also smiling.

Could anyone be as happy as she was in this moment? After all that had happened in their first year of knowing each other—from imprisonment and escapes to kidnappings, revolutions, and wars—the years since had been relatively quiet. She and Kai had enjoyed a long engagement. There had never felt like much need to hurry, and their lives had been so hectic with their own responsibilities—him to the Eastern Commonwealth and her to Luna. Months of diplomatic meetings between Earth and Luna, and finally ushering in a new era in Luna's history when Cinder chose to dissolve the monarchy and host their first elections for a new leader.

Until finally, *finally*, the time had felt right.

Her new role as a Lunar ambassador had brought her to Earth more frequently, and everyone knew that eventually she would become the empress. *She* knew that she would eventually become the empress.

But those words paled in comparison to a greater joy unfurling in her stomach.

After today, she would be Kai's wife. Kai would be her husband.

And it would happen, strangely enough, in the very ballroom where she had once fought off Queen Levana, her wicked aunt, in an effort to save Kai's life. The wedding would happen in the same ballroom where Kai had learned that she was cyborg and Lunar, where he had once ordered her arrest.

Who would have imagined that now, all these years later—

“Cinder, *what* are you doing?”

Her head snapped up. She looked at the reflection of the room's door in the mirror, expecting to see Iko. But the door was closed and Iko wasn't there.

Frowning, she glanced around and spotted Iko, not at the door, but seated on the sill of the open window.

Cinder gasped and launched herself from the seat. “Iko, what are you—?”

“You're going to be late!” Iko interrupted. “Torin is in a tizzy over it all. Come on, come with me, before we're both in huge trouble.”

“Late?” Cinder noted the time on the clock embedded in her retinal interface. “We still have hours, and I'm not even in my dress yet.” She gestured at the elaborate gown hung on the wardrobe doors—bold red with a golden phoenix embroidered on the skirt, its tail feathers flowing down into a train so long she imagined it unfurling all the way Scarlet and Wolf's farm in southern France.

Then she gestured at her much more practical outfit of cargo pants and a black tank top.

Iko rolled her eyes. “One of these days, I'm going to burn every pair of cargo pants you own.”

“You wouldn't dare.”

“I would, and you know it. Also—what's with the boots? We're in a palace. All you have to do is walk from here to the

ballroom. It isn't like you're going to be tromping through mud puddles or something."

Cinder shrugged uncomfortably. "Well—you're wearing bunny ears," she muttered.

The diversion worked. Iko preened and touched one of the soft white ears poking up from amid her blue braids. "I had them imported. They're all the rage in Artemisia right now."

Cinder rolled her eyes. "Would you come inside? We're on the fourth floor! How did you even get up here?"

She reached for Iko's arm to pull her in, but Iko pulled away with a shake of her head, braids swinging. "No time for that, *mi amor!* We have to go."

"Go where?" asked Cinder—at the same moment she heard a thundering knock at the bedroom door. Whoever it was sounded impatient. Could it be Torin? Or the attendants sent to wrestle her into the wedding gown?

"Quick, follow me!" said Iko. Then, quick as a blink, she ... *fell*.

"Wait—Iko!"

Cinder looked from the open and empty window to the shut door. The knock came again.

★ ★ ★

If Cinder should follow Iko out the window, go to [Chapter 2](#).

If Cinder should answer the knock at the door, go to [Chapter 10](#).

Chapter 2

Ignoring the knock, Cinder rushed to the window. A huge tree grew just outside, and she distantly thought that she couldn't recall a tree being at this window before, especially one with ... were those roses? It was far too early in the year for such lush, fragrant blooms.

But she was too distracted searching for Iko to give it much thought, and—there, she caught a flash of fluffy white ears deep in the foliage.

“Iko, wait!” she cried, hauling herself out through the window. She grasped for the nearest branch and had no sooner pulled herself out onto the limb when she heard the tree groan beneath her weight. Then—

Crack.

The branch splintered.

Cinder fell, hitting twigs and leaves and thorns as she screamed, plummeting to the ground so far below.

But she didn't hit the ground.

Instead, she fell into ... nothingness.

Cinder struggled to catch her breath as her descent slowed to a lazy drifting. It felt like being in space before they figured out how to instate artificial gravity on the ships. She was surrounded by nothing but utter blackness and the smell of wet earth. Until, somewhere far below, she spotted a single star.

Expanding.

Widening.

Not a star—a hole.

Cinder tumbled through the hole. Gravity latched on to her again, yanking her the final bit of distance so that she landed on her stomach with a grunt.

“What just happened?” she muttered, pushing herself upward. She felt disoriented, her head spinning like she’d just been put through an engine turbine. Her brain interface was flashing with warnings and system checks, but she dismissed it all to clear her vision as she looked around.

Her lips parted.

She was not on the grounds of New Beijing Palace anymore.

In fact, she had no idea *where* she was. A meadow of some sort, surrounded by what might have been a forest, but the plants here were like none she’d ever seen. A towering pine tree had needles that shimmered silver in the sunlight like ... well, sewing needles. And what she thought might be an ash tree, except its limbs were smoking, and when a breeze blew through its branches, drifts of actual ash were scattered to the forest floor.

And there were the strangest flowers. Polka dot petunias and zebra-striped zinnias and—

Movement dragged Cinder’s gaze to the edge of the meadow.

Iko!

Scampering off into the trees.

“Iko!” Cinder yelled, bolting to her feet and chasing after her. “Iko, come back! Where are you going?”

It might have been an illusion, for as Cinder darted in between spiraling and knotted tree trunks, she lost sight of her best friend. She kept pushing forward, swatting away vines

and bugs, until a spark of pain shot up her human hand. She yelped and spun to face the insect she had just knocked away.

The insect that was sitting on a broad, flat leaf, its entire body burning like the lit end of a match, toasting a hole right through the plant.

Cinder shook her head, baffled. She'd seen so much of Earth and Luna during her time as queen and diplomat, but she'd never seen anything like this before. "What *is* this place?" she murmured to herself.

"Haven't you ever seen a firefly before?" said a dreamy voice.

Cinder looked up. Her heart leaped at the sight of a beautiful, familiar face. Winter was lounging in a tree branch, grinning a secretive smile. She, too, wore a headband settled into her thick black curls, but instead of rabbit ears, hers were of a purple cat.

"You look a little lost," Winter purred, letting one of her legs slip off the branch to sway back and forth. "You might want to find a way home before long. People have a habit of ... losing their heads, here in the Kingdom of Hearts."

Cinder frowned. "The Kingdom of Hearts?"

She'd never heard of it, and a quick scan of her encyclopedic brain didn't bring up any matches.

"Right. Um. Winter ... did you see Iko come through here recently?" She hesitated, before adding, "Also, why aren't you back at the palace? The ceremony is going to be starting soon."

"Ceremony?" Winter perked up—even her faux ears seemed to swivel forward excitedly. "You mean, the queen's garden party?"

"Um, no ... I mean my—"

“Best be going, then. I would hate to be late. I do love an enthralling round of croquet...”

With a grin and a wink, Winter snapped her fingers, and vanished.

Cinder stood gaping at where she had just been for a long moment, before she gave herself a firm shake. “Anxiety dream,” she said to herself. “That’s what this is. An anxiety dream. I just have to close my eyes and tell myself to wake up.”

But no sooner had she squeezed her eyes shut than she heard ... singing. A little bawdy and off-key, and not too far away.

She opened her eyes, and after noting that she was definitely still in the strange forest and that neither Iko or Winter was anywhere to be seen, she started picking her way through the brush.

She hadn’t gone far before she was stepping out into another clearing, where a long table had been set with colorful cloths and scarves, candlesticks and flower posies, trays of treats and steaming teapots and dozens of brightly painted teacups.

And there, sitting at opposite ends of the table, were Thorne and Cress—Thorne in a ridiculously tall top hat and Cress in yet another set of bunny ears.

Maybe those headbands really were all the rage in Artemisia. Iko did have an eye for strange new fashion trends ...

Most unusual of all, though, was how both Thorne and Cress were singing an obnoxious space shanty.

Aye, she’s prettiest thing you could see—

As silver and shiny could be.

The curve of her thrusters,

The hull with its luster,

*A cockpit no podship could beat!
Oh, soon my Rampion will be
A'bringin' us crumpets and tea.
Then we'll be leavin' Hearts
With our cargo of tarts—
Aye, then you and I'll fly free!*

Cress cut off suddenly when she spotted Cinder.

“Ah—here she is!” she squealed, launching herself so fast from the table that her chair toppled over into the grass and tea splashed across the tablecloths. She took Cinder by the hand. “Come join the tea party! We’ve been waiting for you!”

“You have?” Cinder looked down at the array of cakes and scones. She picked up a pretty glass bottle with a tag on it that read, in flourishing script, *Drink me*. “What is this? Some sort of pre-wedding party or something?”

Thorne laughed and kicked his feet up onto the table, while lifting a cup of tea in a toast. “More like an un-wedding party.”

Cinder hesitated. “Un-wedding?”

He shrugged. “Can’t very well be there if you’re here, now can you?”

“Oh!” said Cress. “That reminds me of a song. Ready?” She took in a deep breath and began singing: “*Aaaaaa ... very merry un-wedding ... to you!*”

Thorne beamed and piped up, “To you!”

“A very merry un-wedding ... to her!”

“For sure!”

“You think you’re getting married ... today!”

“No way!”

“That’s only if you don’t want to stay—”

“And play!”

Growing more annoyed with the song by the moment, Cinder looked out to the thick forest around her. Where had Iko gone?

“Go on, drink it,” said Thorne.

Cinder started. She hadn’t realized they’d stopped singing, and the clearing felt eerily silent all of a sudden in the wake of their racket.

He nodded at the bottle in her hand. “I always follow the directions scrawled on weird little tags. Drink me, eat me, don’t push this button”—he paused, his brows furrowing—“wait, no, I *did* push the button. That was the problem.”

“What is it?” Cinder asked. “In the bottle?”

Cress giggled. “Who knows? That’s the fun of it. Go on, give it a try!”

★ ★ ★

If Cinder should drink the bottle, go to [Chapter 3](#).

If Cinder should walk away, go to [Chapter 47](#).

Chapter 3

With a strange premonition that she was probably going to regret this, Cinder uncorked the bottle with her thumb and raised it to her lips. She took a long swig. The liquid inside tasted a bit like cooked mushrooms mixed with rainbow sprinkles, and she grimaced as it slid down her throat, warming her from the inside.

She set the bottle back down on the table and just had time to take in the looks of curious anticipation on Cress's and Thorne's faces, when she felt herself ... changing.

Shrinking.

Her whole body was tingling and squeezing in on itself. The table was suddenly eye-level.

A second later, the table was towering high above her.

She cried out in shock.

What was happening?

The next thing she knew, she was surrounded by a jungle of grass.

She checked her limbs, patting her sides and arms with her hands. Everything seemed intact, just ... smaller. Even her cyborg parts had shrunk down, which didn't seem possible, biologically speaking. She was now no taller than one of those Princess Selene action figures that had been all the rage after the Lunar Revolution.

Cinder had barely recovered from her shock when a beetle skittered past, as tall as her knee. She yelped and lunged out of its way, but it paid her no heed.

“Oh, good,” drawled a grumpy voice. “A visitor.”

Cinder spun to find herself peering at the top of a red-and-white-speckled mushroom. Sitting atop it, legs crossed, holding the mouthpiece of an amethyst-colored hookah pipe, sat Jacin.

“Jacin! You’re here too? And you’re”—she hesitated, confused—“miniature. Like me.”

He blew out an annoyed sigh. “I’m supposed to be a caterpillar,” he said, “but I’m not wearing that antennae thing. I refuse. She can’t make me.” He gestured at a discarded headband with two yellow puffballs attached to springs.

“She?”

“Iko. She can be very demanding.”

“Believe me, I’ve noticed.”

Jacin inhaled deeply from the hookah, then made a face and started coughing. Billows of purple smoke burst from his mouth. The first cloud was shaped like a cat with a huge smile. The second, a crown. The third looked like the Rampion, and it shot away from Jacin and up toward the sky. When his coughing finally stopped, he shoved the hookah off the mushroom and pushed back his blond hair. “All right. Let’s get this over with. Who are you?”

Cinder stared. “Who am I?”

“It’s not a trick question.”

Her frown deepened. “Um—”

“Actually,” Jacin interrupted before she could really think of how to answer, “it is a trick question. It is absolutely a trick question. There are only four possible answers, and spoiler alert, they are all the wrong answer, but there you go. It is

what it is.” He spread his hands, gesturing toward the mushroom stalk beneath him. “Make your choice.”

“Make my...” Cinder paused. She hadn’t noticed it before, but she saw now that there was a door set into the mushroom stem. Well—more like a wrought-iron gate with a golden handle. Written into the ornate ironwork was the word:

MURDERER.

“Murderer?” Cinder barked, offended. “I’m not a murderer, I know that much!”

“Aren’t you?” said Jacin. “You didn’t kill Levana?”

“That’s not fair. That was self-defense!”

He shrugged. “Then make another choice.”

Cinder walked around the base of the mushroom. She counted three more entryways, each with a word scrawled into it.

MURDERER upon the iron gate.

MONARCH upon a heavy oak door with a Gothic arch.

MARTYR upon a heavy marble slab.

And MAD upon a gate crafted of willow branches and moss.

She considered the options. She didn’t think of herself as a murderer, but ... she *had* killed. And she definitely didn’t think of herself as a martyr either, though she’d had to make plenty of sacrifices over the years. She used to be a monarch, and she would be again, assuming she got back in time to marry Kai and be crowned empress.

And mad?

Well, right now, she was definitely feeling a little ticked off. So there was that. But as soon as she thought it, a note popped up from her brain interface reminding her that *mad* could also be an old-fashioned term meaning *mentally unwell*.

Which was not particularly helpful.

She crossed her arms and tapped her fingers against her elbows, annoyed.

Which door to choose?

★ ★ ★

If Cinder should choose the Murderer door, go to [Chapter 16](#).

If Cinder should choose the Monarch door, go to [Chapter 18](#).

If Cinder should choose the Martyr door, go to [Chapter 19](#).

If Cinder should choose the Mad door, go to [Chapter 20](#).

Chapter 4

Cinder made her way out onto a lawn, where the grass was lush and emerald green and the perfume of thousands of roses hung thickly in the air. As she passed beneath a trellis covered in thorns and blooms, something dripped onto her shoulder.

She paused and swiped at the drop.

When she pulled her hand back, a smear of red coated her steel fingers.

Her heart hiccuping, she looked up, expecting to see some horrible bloody sight ... but it was only the roses bleeding down on top of her.

She frowned. Reaching up, she picked one of the roses off the vine and gave it a shake. It splattered across her shirt, revealing hints of the white rose underneath. Not blood, but bright red paint.

A cheer drew her attention back to the lawn. Tucking the rose back into the trellis, she walked down a path, gravel crunching under her boots, until the garden opened up into a large croquet court. Onlookers—both human and animal, all dressed in frilly lace gowns and cravats, top hats and parasols—either stood picking at the offerings on a glorious table laden with tea and desserts or attentively watched a dozen players at the oddest game of croquet Cinder had ever witnessed.

Not far away, a red-haired girl in a multilayered crimson gown tucked a flamingo beneath her arm and gave a rolled-up

hedgehog a blow with the bird's head. The hedgehog-croquet-ball tumbled straight for Cinder.

“Great shot, Your Majesty!” someone shouted.

Followed by said majesty screaming, “Stop my hedgehog!”

But Cinder didn't stop it. She just hopped over the creature as it came hurtling toward her and let it roll off into the nearest rosebush.

A scream of rage hit her ears. “How dare you let my hedgehog get away! *Wolf!* Intruder!”

“Wolf?” Cinder blinked and squinted her eyes against the sun's glare. The girl in the red dress was *Scarlet*, almost unrecognizable without her jeans and red hoodie. But she still had her cascade of ginger curls and her constellations of freckles—now blazing against flushed cheeks.

Behind her, Wolf came plodding across the lawn. A black executioner's hood hung over his brow and a fang could be seen jutting from behind his lips. The surgical mutations he'd undergone on Luna had left him purely terrifying ... that is, until someone got to know him and realized he was more shy puppy than feral beast, and that his loyalty to Scarlet and Cinder and the rest of their friends was unshakable.

The enormous ax he was carrying did seem worrisome at first, but maybe he'd just been out chopping firewood?

“Wolf! Scarlet!” Cinder cried, smiling awkwardly. “I'm not an *intruder*. It's me!”

“Yes, it's you,” said Scarlet. “And *you* ruined my perfect score. Off with her head!” She lifted the flamingo and pointed the bird's beak right at Cinder, as she had once seen pointed a shotgun at a sadistic thaumaturge. The thought brought back a torrent of memories—battles of long ago, the many times Cinder had to run for her life or choose to stay and fight.

“Wait. Off with my—what?”

“You heard me! Wolf. Go on.” Scarlet waved her fingers, as if she were a queen and Wolf her dutiful servant. It wasn’t like Scarlet at all. Was she under some Lunar manipulation? What was wrong with her?

And *why* was Wolf flexing his grip on the ax’s handle, eyes gleaming, as he strode in Cinder’s direction.

She gulped and took a step back. Instincts took over and Cinder felt the tip of her left pointer finger opening up, the chamber inside her palm preparing to load a tranquilizer dart.

Preparing to fight.

“Wolf, what are you doing? What’s wrong with you?”

But Wolf just shrugged and gave the ax a few practice swings. It whistled through the air. “I know better than to argue with the Queen of Hearts.”

★ ★ ★

If Cinder should run away, go to [Chapter 5](#).

If Cinder should tranquilize Wolf, go to [Chapter 6](#).

Chapter 5

Gritting her teeth, Cinder forced the gun in her hand to retract the dart. This was Wolf. This was Scarlet. This was all a big misunderstanding. She was not going to fight some of her best friends.

She had decided this, with utmost determination, when Wolf sighed, somewhat apologetically, and raised the ax.

Cinder turned on her heel and ran.

She heard Scarlet's hollers. "Get her! Stop her! Off with her head!"

Party guests screamed and scattered as Cinder barreled past. She leaped over the dessert table, just barely clearing an enormous red-and-white cake, which looked an awful lot like the wedding cake she was supposed to be eating right about now. On a whim, she scooped her finger through the frosting, hoping she might have a moment to enjoy it when she wasn't about to die, and kept running.

On the other side, a line of rose trees dripping red paint led to the entrance of giant hedge maze. As Cinder ran, she heard more footsteps behind her. Glancing back, her breath caught.

It wasn't just Wolf chasing her, but an entire deck of life-size cards. Diamonds and spades, hearts and clubs, pouring out from every pocket of the gardens. They wielded swords and spears and marched toward her in a relentless stream.

Cinder cried out and dove into the hedge maze, where she was immediately greeted by a choice. Left, right, left, right!

She ran blindly, not stopping to think, to consider, to guess. All the while, Scarlet's orders echoed above her. *Off with her head!* It was met with eerie laughter, the giggle of little girls, and somewhere in the distance—Iko.

Iko!

“You’re going to be late! Wake up, Cinder, you’re going to be late!”

“Wait!” she yelled, as the voice grew fainter in the distance. “Wait! Iko!”

“Off with her head,” chanted the cards. “Off with her head. Off with her head. Off with her—”

Suddenly, finding herself fed up with all this nonsense, Cinder stopped and spun around to face her pursuers.

The cards came to an abrupt halt at seeing her murderous expression.

Even Wolf hesitated, and Scarlet, who was not far behind, finally stopped shouting and gave a surprised little hiccup instead.

“I’ve had enough of this!” Cinder shouted. She lifted up her finger covered in white buttercream. “I am supposed to be getting married right now. I am supposed to be eating cake, not running for my life.” In an act of rebellion, she stuck the frosting into her mouth, enjoying the one decadent bite with a delightful swoon. It instantly calmed her, and made her bolder yet. “I will not be threatened by you,” she continued. As she yelled, she felt herself changing. She felt herself growing ... *larger*.

“And you,” she went on, pointing at Wolf, “might look like a scary mutant, but you’re not a killer. If anything, you’re the biggest softie of any of us! Well, except maybe Cress.”

Slowly, Wolf let the ax drop down into the grass, his vivid green eyes flashing with emotion. “It’s like she knows my soul.”

“And you, Scarlet! Honestly!” she snapped.

Scarlet shrank back, but it was impossible to say if it was because of the tone of Cinder’s voice or because of her towering height.

“It was just a game of croquet. I thought by now you’d learned to control your temper.”

Chastised, Scarlet crossed her arms over her chest and sulked. “I don’t like losing.”

“And I don’t like being chased by a ... a pack of cards!” She swiped her hand across the cards, who now stood no taller than her ankle. The cards shrieked as they were flung up into the air, only to come raining down over Cinder like a magic trick.

“And I don’t! Like! Being! Late!” she screamed.

“Cinder! *Wake up!*”

Cinder gasped and jerked upward.

She was sitting at a work desk. Her neck and back ached from being bent over it for too long, and her left ankle ached because ... well, the cyborg foot that was attached to it was far too small.

Rubbing her palms into her eyes, Cinder glanced around at the bustling market of New Beijing, then back into her mechanic’s booth. Iko—squat little robot Iko, with her glossy white pear-shaped body and single blue eye sensor—rolled toward her on treads that crunched over the ground littered with bolts and screws. Her three-pronged hand gave Cinder’s shoulder a shake.

“Took you long enough to wake up,” she said. “I’m going to go get that foot you wanted, the one that will fit you properly. Didn’t think I should leave you here asleep.”

“No. No, you’re right.” Cinder yawned and stretched out a series of kinks in her spine. “I was just having the strangest

dream.” She tried to remember how the dream had started, but it was so bizarre and convoluted that it took her a moment to trace it all the way back to the beginning.

When she finally remembered, she started to laugh at the absurdity of it all.

“In it, Prince Kai came to our booth,” she said, and Iko’s sensor flashed with piqued interest. “He had an android he needed fixed. And then ... we fell in love, but it turned out I was *Lunar*, and...” She trailed off, remembering an awful part of the dream, when Peony had gotten sick.

She gave her head a shake. “It was definitely the strangest I’ve ever had. A little nightmarish at times, actually.”

“Well, I can’t dream,” said Iko, with a melodramatic sigh. “But if I could, I wouldn’t call any dream in which Prince Kai and I fall in love a *nightmare*.”

Cinder chuckled, her heart fluttering unexpectedly at the memory of kisses and proposals and ...

She shook her head, trying to clear it. Silly subconscious. She wasn’t about to waste her time fantasizing about—

“Excuse me?”

She and Iko both spun around to see a stranger at the booth’s entrance. He was dressed in a gray hooded sweatshirt and carrying an android under one arm. “I’m looking for Linh Cinder.”

The end.

Chapter 6

Reasoning to herself that it wouldn't be the *first* time she'd shot Wolf with a tranquilizer and knocked him out cold, Cinder lifted her hand, pointed her finger—and directed the internal mechanism to fire.

Except ... nothing happened. No projectile shot from her finger. Instead, a light blinked in the corner of her vision, along with a warning message.

Jam detected in ammunition cartridge. Troubleshoot?

“*Gah!* Not now!” she shouted, backing away as Wolf sauntered closer, the ax resting across his shoulders. “W-Wolf,” she stammered, her voice rising as she tugged on her fingers, trying to wriggle the joints around enough to dislodge the dart inside. “Let’s think about this. You are not a monster.”

Wolf hesitated, a deep sadness flickering in his eyes. “I know,” he said quietly. “But somehow, I keep getting cast as one, which is ... it’s really discouraging.”

“I bet it is,” she said, trying to sound understanding. With another tug, something slid loose on her finger. At first she’d thought she was making progress, but then with a glance down at her hand, she froze.

Her ring. It was missing.

“No! Where—?”

“What is taking so long?” Scarlet shouted. “Off with her head!”

“Can’t you say anything else?” Cinder shouted back as she searched the ground. She spotted it—a hint of gold, lying not far from a hedgehog who had rolled up into a ball and was apparently trying to take a nap.

Cinder went to dive for the ring, but Wolf stepped in front of her, blocking her path. His shadow fell over her, the ax catching a sinister glint of sunlight.

Cinder swallowed hard and lifted her hands in a show of peace.

“Wolf—” she started, when an ear-splitting *caw* interrupted whatever plea she would say next. They both turned to see a blur of black feathers swoop down from the sky, snatch the ruby ring in its beak, and take off soaring toward the far reaches of the garden.

Cinder let out an affronted cry and was about to chase after the bird, when a shadow fell over the croquet lawn and a scream filled the air. All around her, party guests and croquet players ran off into the orchards or ducked beneath the dessert table, shouting the monster had returned, the *Jabberwock* had returned! Even Wolf backed away, putting himself in a better place to protect Scarlet, who stood gaping up into the sky.

Slowly, Cinder turned.

Her breath caught. The Jabberwock was a terrifying monster, with a long, slithery neck, leathery wings, an enormous body covered in black scales ... and it was flying straight toward her.

Or—was it flying after that raven that had just stolen her ring?

★ ★ ★

If Cinder should try to chase after the raven, go to [Chapter 51](#).

If Cinder should hide from the Jabberwock, go to [Chapter 7](#).

Chapter 7

At the last moment, as the Jabberwock swooped over the lawn and let out its horrendous shriek, Cinder dove beneath the nearest dessert table.

She wasn't alone. A collection of party guests were huddled behind the lace tablecloth, shivering with fear. At least, most were shivering with fear, whereas a few seemed perfectly content to go on enjoying the soirée as if nothing untoward were happening, swirling cream into their porcelain teacups and nibbling on pastries taken from the buffet.

Cinder spied a silver tray within arm's reach. The tray was set on a round doily, and it held a tower of the most perfect rose-pink macarons, neatly stacked on top of one another as if they'd been sitting here on the grass beneath this table, undisturbed, this whole time.

A little flag had been stuck into the topmost macaron, with curly calligraphy that read, simply, EAT ME.

"They might help," said a familiar voice. "Or they might not."

Cinder's heart soared and she glanced around to see Winter lounging beneath the other side of the table. She was sprawled out on her side, her cheek rested on one palm and her other hand idly plucking little white daisies from the grass. Most peculiar, though, was that she was wearing a striped purple bodysuit, complete with fluffy violet ears and a long tail that draped over her legs. Cat whiskers had been painted over her face, crossing over the pale scars on her cheek.

“Winter, what are you doing here? And why are you dressed like a cat?”

She looked around at the other hiding guests, wondering whether this was actually a costume party she’d stumbled into. There was something distinctly second era about their frilly dresses and cravats ...

“What do you mean?” asked Winter, just as the tail, which Cinder was sure was nothing but stuffed fabric, gave a very lifelike flicker.

“Erm. Never mind. You said something might help?”

“Oh yes. The macarons.” Winter scooted the plate closer to Cinder. “Their instructions are very clear. You see? *Eat me*. Hard to misinterpret.”

“Yes, but ... what will happen if I eat one?”

Winter shrugged. “Who knows?”

Cinder frowned. “But ... if you don’t know what they’ll do, then ... how can you know it will help?”

“Precisely,” said Winter with a giggle. “Which is why they *might* help, or ... they might not.”

Cinder studied the platter of confections a long moment.

They did look divine, and the roars and screams and crashes outside the dessert table only seemed to be getting worse.

Before she could second-guess herself, Cinder grabbed a macaron from the plate.

Proceed to [Chapter 41](#).

Chapter 8

“And they all lived happily to the end of their days,” said Cinder. She clapped her hands together. “And with that ... it’s time for bed.”

She started to lean over to give four-year-old Rikan a kiss on his brow, but something about the confused look on his face gave her pause. She sat back. “What’s wrong?”

“That’s not how it *really* happened,” he said. “Is it?”

He turned away from Cinder to look at Peony, his big sister by four years. They technically had separate rooms in the palace, but Peony had been snuggling beside her baby brother ever since he was out of his crib and had declared that *she* was better than their Lunar cyborg mother *and* their Emperor father *and* the entire palace’s worth of royal guards when it came to keeping away night terrors. And so they shared the same bed each night, after story time with Mom and Dad ... or sometimes Torin, who turned out to do kind of amazing character voices.

“How *what* really happened?” asked Peony. “You mean the day of Mom and Dad’s wedding?” She gave her head a firm shake. “Definitely not.”

“How should you know?” said Cinder, ruffling her hair. “You weren’t there.”

“Yeah, but Aunt Iko has told me all about it, and showed me a bunch of pictures.” She met her brother’s gaze. “It sounds like it was a pretty normal wedding.”

Cinder laughed. It often occurred to her that her children would never truly appreciate just how abnormal her life was, or her relationship with Kai, for that matter. Which meant, by default, they would never understand how abnormal their lives were either. How much she and Kai had had to fight to claim their own happy ending.

And maybe that wasn't a bad thing. Maybe it was perfectly all right for them to look at their parents and see their love and their future exactly as it should be.

"You don't have to believe it," she said. "But just don't tell your aunt Cath and uncle Jest. They'd be very hurt."

Now *both* kids looked suspicious.

"We don't have an aunt Cath and uncle Jest," said Rikan.

"Oh, but you do. You've just never met them. They're very busy running their bakery, but we'll take you to meet them sometime soon. You haven't really lived until you've tasted Cath's lemon tarts." With a laugh at their bunched brows, Cinder slid off the bed and pulled the blankets up to their chins. "Enough questions. It's time for bed."

"Did I miss the story?"

"Daddy!" cried Peony, sitting up and raising her arms.

Kai swooped to the other side of the bed, his dress shirt from a long day of diplomacy rumpled and unbuttoned at his neck. But his eyes shone as he kissed Peony and Rikan and helped Cinder finish tucking them in.

"I was telling them about Cath and Jest," said Cinder with a wink in his direction, "and our adventurous wedding day."

"Ah," said Kai with a knowing nod, "that's quite the story." Coming around to Cinder's side of the bed, he laced their fingers together. "Maybe tomorrow I can tell you about the bachelor party Thorne threw for me the week before our wedding. It involved tigers and karaoke and was something of a disaster." He returned Cinder's wink.

“*Real* tigers?” asked Rikan.

Kai laughed. “Tomorrow,” he promised, as Cinder turned off the light.

The end.

Chapter 9

Cinder shook her head, dazed.

“Cinder?”

She blinked. Her vision began to clear.

“Cinder, are you all right?”

Kai?

He was whispering, his voice tinged with concern.

Cinder squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, and when she opened them again, the world began to right itself. Sensation returned to her right hand—the warmth of Kai’s fingers holding hers.

The scent of peonies perfumed the air. She was wearing a gown. A heavy gown. A heavy *wedding* gown.

And there was Kai, looking much more comfortable in his finery than she was. He was studying her, his brows tight with worry.

She blinked and tore her gaze from him. Winter stood behind the altar, watching them. “Should I go on?” she whispered.

Cinder turned the other direction, to a vast hall full of onlookers. It might have been enough to make panic set in ... except that her gaze fell immediately on the front row, and she saw all the love spilling forth from the faces there. Iko and Scarlet and Wolf and Cress and Thorne and Jacin and Kinney and Tressa and even Torin, all watching her with ... well, yes,

some amount of concern, given Cinder's continuing silence. But also friendship. Acceptance. Encouragement.

She brought her gaze back to Kai. His eyebrows lifted in a question.

She tried to remember what Winter had said, but all she could think about was the feeling that she'd just woken from a nightmare, to find herself in the midst of a the most remarkable dream.

"I love you," she blurted out.

And with that—the tension broke.

Thousands of people laughed, many in relief. She wondered just how long her awkward silence had persisted.

Even Kai looked a little relieved as his worry melted away to a smile. "Thank the stars," he said. "Because I've become pretty attached to you, too." But his grin still held a hint of uncertainty. "Cinder ... is everything all right? Do you need a moment?"

"No." She gave a rough shake of her head. "I don't need a moment. I just ... I was just daydreaming, I think." She inhaled a deep breath, and when she let it out, she allowed the last clinging remnants of the strange visions to slip away. Leaving her entirely present. With Kai. With all the people she loved the most. With the people who would soon call her empress. She glanced at Winter. "I'm sorry. We can continue now." As she looked back at her soon-to-be husband, her heart swelled with the contented feeling that everything was precisely right in the universe. "I'm ready."

Kai's hands tightened around hers, and Winter began. "It is with great honor that I will be the first to congratulate you two on your union. To the world, you may be Emperor Kaito and Princess Selene, but to me, you will always be two of my dearest friends, and I know of no one who deserves this happiness more. It is with greatest joy that I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss—"

Kai didn't wait for her to finish. He slid his arms around Cinder's waist and pulled her close, and all she heard after that were the fireworks being set off over New Beijing and across the entire Earthen Union. The celebration that reached all the way to the moon.

The end.

Chapter 10

Spinning away from the window, Cinder marched to the door and threw it open.

“What is it? My best friend just—”

Her words caught when she saw who was on the other side of the door.

Or ... *what* was on the other side of the door.

What looked like a man stood before her in old-fashioned livery. But his body appeared faintly translucent and there was, of all things, a chisel lodged into one eye socket, dripping blood down the front his tunic.

“You’re a ... a ghost?!” she stammered, trying to recall if she’d ever heard rumors of New Beijing Palace being haunted.

The man bowed deeply. “Forgive the intrusion,” he said in an accent that she found difficult to place. German, perhaps? “I have been sent to summon you to the Erlking’s castle. I’m afraid he is *quite* displeased, which could lead to dire consequences. For you ... and your royal wedding.” He gestured toward the hall. “If you’ll follow me.”

“Uh ... um.” Cinder glanced back toward the window and realized, with a start, that it was now shut. Had she only imagined Iko sitting on that ledge a moment before?

She rubbed her temple. Maybe the stress of the wedding was starting to get to her. Maybe she should lie down.

“Your Majesty, I urge you to make haste. The Erlking is not known for patience.”

“Call me Cinder,” she said. “I’m not a queen anymore. Or an empress ... yet.”

The man smiled. “We shall see.” He started down the hallway, clearly expecting her to follow.

Cinder glanced back at her gown. She didn’t want to be rude, especially to a ghost. Being haunted by a restless spirit wasn’t exactly how she wanted to begin her marriage. Maybe she could go talk to this Erlking fellow and figure out what he wanted. She still had plenty of time before the wedding began.

“All right, I’m coming,” she grumbled, chasing after the ghost. He led her through servants’ back hallways, many of which she’d never seen before, and down countless stairways, until finally they stepped outside onto the palace’s driveway, lined with cherry blossoms in full bloom.

A carriage stood waiting for her and she paused to stare at it. It looked, of all things, like a giant pumpkin, complete with curling vines cast in silver and two gray steeds.

The ghost opened the door and held out a hand to help Cinder inside.

“Where exactly is this castle?” she asked.

“Deep in the Aschen Wood, of course.”

“The Aschen Wood. Naturally.”

She had never heard of such a place, but there was only one forest nearby that she knew of, so that must be it.

Which was when it occurred to Cinder that she probably shouldn’t be taking rides from strangers, even undead ones.

She wondered whether it would be rude to ask if she could drive herself ...

★ ★ ★

If Cinder accepts his help into the carriage, go to [Chapter 11](#).

If Cinder decides to drive the carriage herself, go to [Chapter 31](#).

Chapter 11

Cinder climbed into the carriage, the inside smelling faintly of cinnamon and nutmeg. She had barely sat down on the cushioned bench when the door shut behind her and the carriage jerked forward. She could hear the melodic clop of horse hooves outside, but there were no windows through which to see where she was being taken.

Despite being a *pumpkin*, the interior of the carriage was surprisingly lavish. An iron sconce held a single burning candle, and the walls were upholstered in rust-colored velvet. Cinder would have been quite comfortable, except that the door she'd entered through had disappeared. She spent a long moment searching for the edges of the doorframe, her pulse beginning to thrum. She had no idea where she was being taken, and she had bad memories of being held prisoner.

But just when she'd unleashed the small knife from her cyborg hand to start cutting through the pumpkin's flesh, the sound beneath the horse hooves and the carriage wheels changed. She paused, listening, as they sounded like they were going over wooden boards, with the sound of crashing waves below.

A moment passed, and then the horses were slowing down.

When the carriage came to a stop, the door appeared again, swinging wide to reveal a sight that definitely wasn't New Beijing.

Retracting the knife, Cinder hesitantly stepped out into the courtyard of a massive castle. Turrets and spires loomed

overhead, towers disappearing into a thick fog that hung cold and heavy in the air. Though the weather had been warm before, now a chill danced down Cinder's skin and her breath crystallized before her.

A series of steps led to the entry door of the castle keep. They were flanked by enormous sculptures—black stone carved into the shape of ferocious, snarling hounds, ready for a hunt.

Then there was the ghost that stood waiting for her, partially transparent in the night. She was a tall, imposing woman, with a blood-soaked scarf tied tight around her neck. She gestured for Cinder to step inside.

Swallowing, Cinder started up the steps, just as a streak of lightning illuminated the massive doors and she could see that the carvings in the wood depicted a mass of monsters. Each one was as realistic as if the doors were alive, and the beasts captured inside were struggling to escape.

A boom of thunder shook the stones beneath her feet, and the doors opened toward her, creaking on huge iron hinges.

Cinder glanced back.

The carriage was gone, and the drawbridge over which it had passed had already been lifted, closing off her exit.

The phantom woman caught her eye and smiled reassuringly. “Do not worry. The Erlking only murders those who disappoint him.”

“The Erl-who?” Cinder asked.

But the woman simply gestured for her to continue on.

Proceed to [Chapter 18](#).

Chapter 12

“My ring?” said Cinder, protectively wrapping her fingers around the engagement ring Kai had given her. The one weighted with meaning and history. “But ... I’m supposed to be getting married. *Today*, in fact.”

The boy shrugged. “Can’t get married if the Erlking kills you.”

Cinder scowled, and looked from him to the spinning wheel to the pile of straw. Finally, she released a heavy sigh. “Fine. But if this doesn’t work, I want it back.”

“Deal.”

The boy held out his palm, and with a sinking sensation in her gut, Cinder took off the ruby ring and gave it to him.

No sooner had his fingers closed over the ring did he spin around, march over to the wheel, and take a seat on the three-legged stool that had been provided. Cinder didn’t see him tuck the ring away, but in the next moment, his hands were busy gathering fistfuls of straw. He gave the wheel a spin, then pressed his foot onto the treadle, and began to feed long strands of dry, brittle straw into the machine.

Cinder’s jaw dropped in amazement.

For the material that wrapped around the wooden bobbin wasn’t straw. It was thin and pliable like thread, but it shimmered like pure gold.

“How?” she asked.

The boy only flashed her that same impervious smile. “Told you I was magic.”

Unsatisfied with this answer, Cinder crossed her arms and watched, trying to see where the illusion happened. Was he Lunar? Could this be a trick of her mind? But surely her lie detector would have been triggered if that were the case.

Was it sleight of hand?

Or some sort of chemical reaction?

But no matter how intently she stared, she could not see how he was doing it.

And then—faster than she would have thought possible—he was finished. All of the straw was gone, replaced with long golden thread.

The boy stood and flourished a bow in her direction. “It’s been a pleasure doing business with you,” he said. Then he held up her ruby ring, showing it to her one last time, before—

Poof.

He was gone.

He had vanished into nothing, and taken her ring with her.

Cinder didn’t have time to recover from her astonishment before a key turned in the door’s lock and the Alder King strode back into the room.

She stiffened, saying nothing as he strode over to the spinning wheel and inspected the golden thread. He did not *smile*, exactly, but his bright eyes glinted with some unspoken approval as he turned back to face Cinder.

“How is it,” he said slowly, “that a girl of your ... particular oddities”—he gestured at her cyborg hand—“has come to have such a remarkable skill?”

★ ★ ★

If Cinder tells him the truth, go to [Chapter 13](#).

If Cinder lies, go to [Chapter 15](#).

Chapter 13

“Well,” said Cinder to the Erlking. “As a matter of fact, I didn’t spin this straw into gold. There was this boy. Red hair. Freckles. Possibly dead? He said something about being a ghost...”

As the Erlking listened, his expression began to shift. It was subtle at first. A narrowing of his eyes, followed by an intrigued lift of one slender eyebrow. A deep breath accompanied by a tensing of his jaw.

“Also,” Cinder continued, “he took my ring. I mean, I guess I did trade it to him, but I’m starting to regret that decision.”

“Indeed,” said the Erlking slowly, his nostrils flaring. “I regret most things involving the poltergeist.”

Cinder frowned. She’d heard of poltergeists—ghosts who supposedly spent their time shrieking and rattling doors and being generally obnoxious. The boy hadn’t struck her as *that* kind of ghost. But her experience with the undead was limited, so how could she be sure?

“I should have known,” the Erlking muttered, storming past her to rip the bobbin full of gold thread from the spinning wheel. He snarled as he stared at it. “I thought it was the girl, but ... I can see now that I was wrong. All this time, that blasted poltergeist was a gold-spinner. Hulda-blessed. And trapped here, in my own castle.”

With a snarl, he turned back toward Cinder. “Follow me,” he snapped, and stormed from the room.

It happened so quickly that it took Cinder a speechless moment to rush after him. He was already halfway down the corridor.

She followed him up a set of winding steps, into an upper room of one of the castle’s towers. She hesitated when she realized they had reached, of all things, a bedroom. It was lavish, but far more Gothic than any of the luxuries of New Beijing Palace. Black-velvet drapes and leaded windows and lace like cobwebs spread across a postered bed.

“This is ... nice,” she said, her chest tightening with discomfort. “But I wasn’t planning on staying. I have to get back to New Beijing.”

The Erlking gave her a maddening look, as though she was ridiculous for assuming the bedroom was for her. He gestured to the vanity against one wall, topped with an enormous mirror framed in ebony. “This looking glass will take you back to where you belong,” he said.

“Oh. Right. The magical looking glass. Of course.” She cleared her throat. “What happened to the carriage?”

He huffed with impatience. “It is otherwise preoccupied. Go on. As I have no use for you, I have no wish to waste more of my time.”

“Yeah, you think *your* time is valuable,” Cinder muttered. She approached the vanity, staring at her own reflection. She was caught off guard to see the sheen of makeup on her skin, the hair that Iko had painstakingly worked on now beginning to slip from its clips. “How does this work, exactly?”

“Simply walk through,” said the Erlking.

Cinder stretched forward her hand. Her cyborg fingers met cyborg fingers in the reflection, but then the glass rippled and her hand slipped through.

Her heart skipped. This was it. She could go home.

But ... she pulled her hand back and looked down at her empty ring finger, regret pooling in her stomach.

★ ★ ★

If Cinder should go through the looking glass, go to [Chapter 30](#).

If Cinder should ask for her ring back, go to [Chapter 32](#).

Chapter 14

Cinder made a derisive sound in the back of her throat. She'd gotten out of plenty of prison cells on her own before, some way more heavily protected than this one.

"Thanks, but no thanks," she said. "I'll find a way out on my own."

The boy looked surprised for a moment, but then shrugged. "Suit yourself."

He waved goodbye. Then, with a snap of his fingers—he was gone. Vanished, as if she'd been imagining him all along.

Cinder rubbed her eyes, wondering if she was seeing things.

But seeing things or not, she was still very much locked inside this dungeon.

Feeling newly determined, she knelt down in front of the lock and released the stiletto knife and screwdriver attachments in her cyborg hand. She listened carefully to the internal mechanisms as she wriggled the tools inside, until—

Click.

With a satisfied grin, she opened the door, revealing an empty corridor outside.

She hurried off down the hall, listening for footsteps or whistling, relieved when she passed no one.

It wasn't long before she found a large iron door that, when she pried it open, thankfully led outside. She stepped out into

fresh air, complete with a cool, fragrant breeze. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting to see—a courtyard, perhaps, or a barren yard hemmed in by an enormous, impassable wall. But she certainly hadn't expected to find herself staring down into a lush garden, complete with topiaries and hedges, fountains and cobblestone paths, and red and white flowers blooming everywhere she looked.

Worried that she might be caught at any moment, Cinder hurried down the steps, away from the door, and into the gardens. She ducked beneath fruit trees and arches of ornamental vines, past a small pond where two trumpet swans swam in lazy circles, until she spotted a manicured lawn in the distance and heard, to her endless surprise, what sounded like a garden party in full swing.

Proceed to [Chapter 4](#).

Chapter 15

Cinder shrugged, pretending that her supposed skill was no big deal. “Didn’t you know?” she said, holding the Erlking’s gaze. “All cyborgs are capable of spinning straw into gold. It’s just one more thing that makes us so amazing.”

A beat of silence passed between them, followed by an amused laugh from the Erlking. “Fascinating,” he said, an unexpected lightness to his tone. “Your talents must be yet another strange blessing from one of the old gods.”

Cinder blinked. *Old gods?* In actuality, her so-called talents were more the result of a lot of surgeries, modifications, and biological tampering. In other words ... science.

But this king guy seemed more inclined to believe the deity story, so she just smiled. “I guess you could say that. And now that you have your gold ... I’d like to go back to New Beijing. I have something kind of important happening today.”

The Erlking clicked his tongue. “Let you go?” He shook his head, his eyes growing brighter with every passing moment. “I don’t think so. Now that I know what you are capable of, I foresee your being very useful to me.”

“What?” she roared, anger quickly rising to the surface. “But I did what you asked!”

“Yes, and you shall do it again.”

Turning on his heel, the Erlking swept from the room. Cinder threw herself after him, but she wasn't quick enough.

The door slammed shut in her face, once again locking her inside.

Proceed to [Chapter 24](#).

Chapter 16

Cinder stepped through the iron gate and found herself in a pumpkin patch—though it was the creepiest pumpkin patch she'd ever seen. In every direction lay patches of mud and tangled vines and rotting, wart-covered gourds.

She was not alone.

The first person she noticed was a girl in an exquisite red-and-white dress, half-covered in mud herself, and the enormous monster that was towering over her. Cinder had never seen anything like it. The closest thing she could compare it to was a dragon, with black scales and fiery eyes and a long, serpentine neck.

In the other direction were two men, locked in battle. One wore all black, with a black heart painted on his cheek. The other was humongous and barrel-chested, with greasy reddish hair and dirty overalls. He was wielding an enormous ax.

Though the smaller boy was quick on his feet, continuously dancing away from the larger man, every now and then he would flinch and groan, as if wounded.

“Hatta!” screamed the girl, and at first Cinder thought she was yelling at the boy in black, until she noticed another person jogging toward them. Another boy, neatly dressed in a velvet coat and top hat. “You have to get the hat!” the girl yelled, backing nervously away from the monster as it stalked toward her. “The sword is inside!”

The boy in the top hat—Hatta?—glanced around.

His gaze landed on Cinder and for a blink, they gaped at each other, equally confused.

Then Hatta's gaze fell down to one of the pumpkins mere steps in front of Cinder. She followed the look, and saw that a pumpkin with a face carved into an agonized grimace was wearing a black jester's hat.

"You!" Hatta yelled, pointing at Cinder. "Grab the hat. Give it to Cath, quickly, now! The sword only answers to royalty. It's the only way to stop the Jabberwock!"

Baffled, Cinder stooped and picked up the hat. She felt the fabric, and was sure that it was nothing more than that—fabric. A simple jester's hat with empty threads on the three points where tiny bells should have been sewn.

The girl cried out.

Cinder swiveled her head to see that she had tripped over a pumpkin and fallen into the mud. The monster snarled, baring massive fangs.

"Quick!" Hatta yelled again. "Throw it to Cath! Now!"

★ ★ ★

If Cinder throws the hat to Cath, go to [Chapter 42](#).

If Cinder reaches inside the hat, go to [Chapter 17](#).

Chapter 17

Cinder upended the hat and peered into its black shadows, then shoved her hand inside. It sank in—deeper and deeper—until her arm was submerged nearly to her shoulder.

Her fingers brushed something cool and hard. She wrapped her hand around it and pulled her arm free.

Her eyes widened. She was holding a sword. Its blade shone in the moonlight, its hilt encrusted with sharp teeth and bleached white bones.

The man in the top hat gasped. “She has the Vorpall Sword! It ... it answered to her. But how...?”

Dropping the hat, Cinder met the shocked gazes around her. The girl in the striped gown looked particularly hopeful, as if some new scheme were occurring to her. Something that could fix *everything*. Cinder had seen that hope before, too often directed at her. It made her want to drop the sword and back away.

“Could she be another queen?” the girl asked. “Jest—it will answer to a queen, won’t it?”

“She must be,” responded the boy with the heart painted on his cheek. “Is it possible the prophecy could have been referring, not to you, Cath, but ... to *her*?”

The monster screeched, as if annoyed to have been forgotten. It lifted up on its back legs and roared at the sky, and when it came back down, the ground thundered beneath Cinder’s feet.

“Kill it!” cried the girl. “Kill it now!”

“No!” roared the large man, swinging his ax again at the boy, who again danced out of reach. “You will not harm her! This is your fault!” He pivoted, aiming the blade of the ax at the man in the top hat. “You did this to her, with your lousy pumpkin seeds. I won’t let you hurt her anymore!”

Cinder frowned. Was this beast a pet of his? He seemed strangely attached.

With another cry, the Jabberwock lurched toward the man in the top hat, fangs snapping. He hollered in surprise and fell back, landing—fine suit and all—in a mud puddle. His eyes widened as the Jabberwock lauded over him.

“Please, no! Hatta!” cried Jest—the boy in black. “Leave him be! We can resolve this.”

“No, not after everything they’ve done,” yelled the girl. “They’ve been tormenting this kingdom for weeks! And now, to kidnap Mary Ann? To threaten to feed her to this monster?” Her blazing eyes met Cinder’s again. “You must end this! You must slay the Jabberwock!”

★ ★ ★

If Cinder tries to slay the Jabberwock, go to [Chapter 43](#).

If Cinder tries to resolve this peacefully, go to [Chapter 46](#).

Chapter 18

Cinder squared her shoulders, opened the massive oak doors, and walked through.

She found herself standing in the vast entry hall of a Gothic castle, where chandeliers crafted of black iron and white bones dangled from the vaulted ceiling. A fire roared in a nearby hearth, but it did little to fight off the chill permeating the air. The very coldness of the castle seeped into Cinder's body, making her limbs ache where metal met bone.

She was drawn toward a tapestry that took up nearly the entire northern wall. Stepping closer, she watched as the fire's glow flickered across a depiction of a group of hounds and hunters on black-coated steeds surrounding a gold-and-red dragon that was as big as a house. Their arrows pierced the beast's wings and tail, and where they struck, drops of inky blood splattered across the ground.

“Surely you have heard the tale?”

She spun around.

A man stood an arm's length before her, though she hadn't heard him approach. He was tall and wiry, with skin the color of moonlight and long, loose hair the same color as the dragon's pitch-black blood. He wore a black-leather vest and breeches and looked an awful lot like one of the hunters pictured in the tapestry.

His bruise-purple lips curled up into a smile that was more cruel than beautiful, even though he was quite possibly the

most attractive man she'd ever laid eyes on. Which was saying something, given that her fiancé was *incredibly* attractive.

“Tale?” she asked, shaken at his unexpected appearance and the way his ice-blue eyes cut right through her.

“Of the glorious battle between the wild hunt and the rubinrot wyvern,” he said, tipping his head toward the tapestry. “Ballads have long been sung of our victory.”

“Oh,” she said, brow furrowing. “No, sorry. I don't think I have heard it.”

He made a sound that was faintly disappointed, then swooped his long fingers toward a corridor. “Please, follow me.”

Without waiting, he strode off into the depths of the castle.

“Um. Sure?” she muttered, hastening after him. “Who are you, exactly?”

“They call me the Alder King.”

The Alder King. The Alder King ...

Cinder racked her brain, but was fairly sure she'd never heard of him, and she wasn't sure if maybe she should have. What if he was some important political ally that she'd accidentally offended somehow? That would be a terrible start to her role as empress.

“Nice to meet you?”

His eyes glinted as he paused at a door and gestured for her to go inside. “I assure you, the pleasure is all mine.”

Cinder stepped into the room, expecting an office, or maybe some sort of parlor for receiving diplomatic guests. She'd seen plenty of those during her time as Lunar ambassador, meeting with dignitaries from the Earthen Union.

She did not expect to see a pile of ordinary hay and ...

“Is that a *spinning wheel*?” she said, walking up to the ancient piece of machinery. She pressed down on one of the delicately carved spokes, giving the wheel a spin. “You like antiques, I take it.”

“Not as much as I like gold.”

She turned to face the Alder King. “Right. Because, presumably, gold can buy ... more antiques?”

She was tempted to point out that the price of gold had been steadily decreasing for decades, ever since the rise of the digital universal currency, but she didn’t want to be rude.

“One supposes that it could buy any number of precious things,” said the man, “but I don’t want it for material purposes. I have ... other plans.”

For the first time, Cinder began to wonder if maybe this was all a scheme to kidnap her and hold her for ransom.

“What is this about?” she asked, crossing her arms. “If there’s something you want from me—”

“There is,” he interrupted, giving her a slight bow that did not feel at all deferential. “And I think you know precisely what it is. You have until the stroke of midnight to complete the task.”

“Task? What task? Wait, where are you—hey! Come back!”

It was no use. The Alder King had slipped back out into the corridor and slammed it shut. A second later, Cinder heard the click of a lock.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she muttered. “If I had a univ for every time someone tried to lock me up somewhere...”

Pacing to the door, she inspected the latch. With the tools in her hand, she thought she might be able to pick the lock—

“Need some help?”

She yelped and spun around. A boy was sitting cross-legged on top of the pile of straw, a tangled mop of copper hair falling in front of an impish smile.

“Stars above,” Cinder muttered, “what is with people in this castle sneaking around?”

“Apologies,” said the boy, picking at a strand of straw and twisting it around his finger. “You were looking a bit like a damsel in distress.”

Cinder snorted. “Yeah, no, sorry. You’ve got the wrong girl.”

She started to turn back to the door, but then paused and slowly shifted her attention back to the boy.

His grin widened.

“How did you get in here?” she asked, searching the other walls, but there was no sign of another entryway. No windows, no doors, no conveniently removable panels on the ceiling ...

“Magic,” said the boy.

She smiled, to humor him. “But really. How?”

“I’m a ghost,” he said. “Popping in and out of places is sort of a thing we can do.”

Her smile fell. Whether magic or a ghost, his answers weren’t going to help her.

Seemingly reading her thoughts, the boy stretched his arms up over his head, as if working the tension from his shoulders. “I can help, you know.”

Cinder’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. “How?”

“The Erlking wants this straw spun into gold, doesn’t he?”

Cinder blinked at the hay. Is *that* what the uncomfortably handsome king had been suggesting?

“He did say something about gold,” she admitted.

“Splendid.” The boy bounced to his feet. “I will spin this straw into gold for you, and all it will cost you is”—he pointed to the engagement ring on Cinder’s finger—“*that*.”

★ ★ ★

If Cinder exchanges the ring for the boy’s help, go to [Chapter 12](#).

If Cinder tries to escape on her own, go to [Chapter 14](#).

Chapter 19

Cinder pushed through the gate and found herself in a graveyard, hedged in on all sides by skyscrapers. She didn't recognize the skyline of the city, but the buildings that stretched toward the sky in every direction cast long shadows across the headstones.

Otherwise, the cemetery would have been peaceful. It was a patch of lush green grass amid the steel and concrete, with old elm trees scattered amid the graves. But the serenity was marred by the sounds of the city—car horns and sirens and shouting. Not to mention the rumble of bulldozers at a construction site, digging up the far corner of the graveyard.

Still, even with all that, the place had an aura of rest, of calm. It was almost entirely empty of visitors ...

Except for one girl who stood not far away, watching Cinder with more annoyance than interest.

She was young—maybe fourteen or fifteen. And even before she'd said a word, Cinder could tell she was the sort of girl who was more thorns than roses.

“Is your superpower the cyborg-hand doodad,” said the girl, her tone dry, “or traveling through space portals? Because both are decent powers, but they don't really go together, so I know you don't have *both*.”

“My ... superpower?” said Cinder.

The girl studied her, her gaze roving from the top of Cinder's head to the toes of her boots.

“Must be the portals,” she said, a bit dismissively. “What’d you pay for that add-on? Looks like quality tech.”

Cinder held up her cyborg hand and flexed her fingers. “It’s not bad. You were joking about the superpower comment, right?”

The girl smirked. “I wish. What, did you just come from some alternate dimension or something? Because being able to do *that* would be epic.”

“Yeah. Maybe I did.” Cinder considered. “But really, if I have a superpower, I guess it’s ... kind of in the realm of mind control. I don’t like to use it that much, though.”

The girl’s eyebrows lifted, and for a moment she looked mildly impressed. Then she laughed softly and shook her head. “Sure. If you say so.”

“Where am I?” asked Cinder, scanning the skyline again.

“Gatlon City. Where did you come from?”

Cinder thought about it. She wasn’t sure what to call that strange place she’d just come from, so instead she said, “New Beijing.”

“As opposed to *Old* Beijing?”

“Exactly.” She walked toward the girl and peered down at the gravestone she was standing in front of. A bouquet of clover flowers lay on top of a small hand mirror.

“I found the mirror at the dig site,” the girl said, gesturing toward the distant construction area. “Pretty sure it’s got some sort of magical properties, ’cause when I touch it, my hand goes right through. Not sure what the point is. But anyway, he really loved that sort of thing, so ... whatever. No one else will care about it.”

She shuffled her feet, apparently embarrassed at having been caught leaving a gift.

The *he* in question, Cinder assumed, was the boy buried here. The gravestone read:

CALLUM TREADWELL
SCHOLAR
BELIEVER
HERO TO THE LAST

“Who was he?” said Cinder, expecting the girl to say it was her dad or brother or best friend.

Instead, she smirked, and answered. “No one. Just another martyr.”

Something about the way she said it made Cinder shiver.

“And who are *you*?” Cinder asked.

The girl met her gaze again. “Most people call me Magpie.”

“Magpie. I’m Cinder.” She nodded toward Callum’s grave. “Do you visit him often?”

Magpie folded her arms, looking suddenly irritable. “I work over there at the dig site most days,” she said. “This is as good a place to spend my breaks as any. Callum was an idiot, but he could be good company.” She let out a long sigh. “I’ve got nothing else to do, anyway. Just ... waiting for my turn.”

“Your turn for what?”

“To tell *my* story.” Magpie smirked, then glanced down at Cinder’s hand. “Pretty ring.”

“Oh. Thanks.” Cinder glanced down at the glinting jewels—though it hadn’t really sounded like a compliment.

“I’d be careful,” said Magpie.

And *that* definitely sounded like a threat.

Cinder tensed. “Careful?”

“There are a lot of thieves in Gatlon City,” said Magpie. Turning her back to Cinder, she started to walk away, calling

over her shoulder, “You wouldn’t want to lose something *precious*.”

Cinder frowned, watching as the girl made her way through the rows of headstones.

She was still pondering Magpie’s words when she heard people yelling. She glanced toward the dig site, as Magpie had called it. People were scurrying around, and even from this distance, Cinder could tell that they were excited about something.

Her curiosity piqued, she took a step toward the site—when she glanced down, and realized that her ring was gone.

She gasped and spun back toward the girl, who had nearly reached the edge of the cemetery, mere feet from a busy city street. If she crossed and Cinder didn’t follow her, she could easily disappear—taking Cinder’s ring with her.

★ ★ ★

If Cinder goes to investigate the dig site, go to [Chapter 21](#).

If Cinder chases after Magpie, go to [Chapter 22](#).

Chapter 20

Cinder passed beneath the arched gate made of mossy twigs and found herself in a forest glen. Gnarled oaks with leaves in shades of crimson and gold stretched out in every direction.

In the center of the clearing, three people were gathered around a wide, flat stone.

Well—no, not people.

One appeared human enough—a man with ridiculous muscles and a scruffy black beard.

Whereas one of the two females appeared to be *elfin*? She had long pointed ears, mischievous eyes, and a belt strung with all manners of flowers and herbs at her hips.

The other had deep reddish skin and ram horns curving out from her brow.

All three were dressed in cloaks and impractical-looking leather armor, like they were heading to one of those fairs that idealized the dark ages from the second era.

“Hello,” chirped the elf. “Do you need help?”

“Uh, maybe?” said Cinder. “I think I’m lost. If you could point me to—”

“Ari!” hissed the horned girl. “What are you doing?”

“What?” asked the elf—Ari.

“Some cyborg NPC shows up and you’re all, *Hi, we’re noobs, please steal all our gold.*”

The elf crossed her arms. “I’m chaotic good, Pru. I’m supposed to help lost travelers.”

A voice suddenly boomed over the glen, making Cinder jump. “Hey, guys, if you’re speaking in character, try to remember to use your character names, okay? It adds to the realism.”

Cinder scanned the treetops. Who had said that?

Pru snorted. “What would really add to the realism is if people didn’t pick names like ‘Quintonian Q. Quicksilver.’”

“Hey, I offered to change it to Quintonian the Queasy, but you vetoed that.”

Pru glowered at him.

Quintonian flexed his bicep.

Ari sighed. “Let’s just move on, okay, Jude—er, Game Master?”

“Yes, definitely,” said the disembodied voice. He cleared his throat. Cinder spun in a full circle, but still could see no sign of who was speaking. “You have arrived in a clearing in the Mad Forest. As I mentioned before, the girl before you appears lost, though not helpless. She has one hand crafted out of some unknown metal, giving her an undeniable air of danger.”

“What?” Cinder barked. “I’m just trying to get home!”

Ignoring her, the voice continued. “A large stone sits in the center of the clearing, and as you approach it, you see a tiny sparkling gem alone on top of the rock.”

“What? There wasn’t any—” Cinder turned back to the stone, and her words cut off. There *was* a tiny red gem, like a ruby, now sitting on top of it.

“What happens if we touch it?” asked Pru, her tone laced with suspicion.

The voice did not answer.

“Only one way to find out!” chirped Quintonian, strutting toward the rock.

Pru stopped him with a hand on his chest. “What are you doing? Every time you go around randomly touching things, something explodes or tries to kill us!”

He shrugged. “My character notes say I’m endlessly inquisitive and that I tend to act first, think later. I’m just playing my role.”

Pru let out a guttural groan. “You are going to get us all killed.”

“I still think we should try talking to the cyborg,” said Ari. “I mean, what’s a cyborg doing in the middle of an enchanted forest? Seems like an odd choice, Game Master.”

Though her tone was teasing, the response from the disembodied voice sounded exhausted. “Give me a break. This campaign went off the rails a long time ago. I’m just trying to salvage what I can.”

“Well, I say we introduce ourselves,” said Ari.

“I say we grab the gem and run,” said Quintonian.

“I say we kill the cyborg and get it over with.” Pru widened her hands, and two flaming balls appeared in front of her palms. “Everything else in this forest has tried to kill us, I’m sure she will too.”

“Fine,” said the voice. “Once again, your lawful evil tiefling is picking a fight with an apparently innocent bystander.”

Quintonian chuckled. “And she blames *me* for almost getting us killed.”

“All right, everyone,” said the voice. “Roll for initiative.”

“Roll for what?” asked Cinder, just as something the size of a pumpkin fell from the sky.

Thankfully—it wasn't a pumpkin. Instead, it was a giant twenty-sided die that hit the dirt right in front of her feet.

★ ★ ★

If Cinder should roll the die, go to [Chapter 29](#).

If Cinder should grab the gem and run, go to [Chapter 28](#).

Chapter 21

As Magpie darted across the city street, Cinder growled to herself and turned toward the commotion at the dig site. She would find the thief later. For now, she could tell that something big was happening, and she felt compelled to find out what it was.

The yells were growing more enthusiastic, and as Cinder picked her way through the cemetery, she saw a crowd of people gathering to see what had happened. Some were dressed in hard hats and overalls, but many were wearing matching gray uniforms with red piping and *Rs* embroidered on their chests.

A barricade had been set up around the dig site. As Cinder approached the yellow tape, she saw that a massive hole had been excavated beneath this section of the cemetery. It was the size of a city block, and at least four stories deep. Various levels were cut into the clay and bedrock, revealing aged stone walls and paths. Cinder had the sense that she was peering into an ancient tomb or underground temple.

In the corner nearest to where Cinder stood, some of the workers were using ropes and pulleys to drag a massive bronze chest onto higher ground. It was clear that this was what had intrigued everyone, and Cinder couldn't help feeling intrigued, too, as they brought the chest up to city level.

The crowd fell into a hush as two of the workers took crowbars to the chest's lid, grunting and straining. Finally, with a last push, the lid was pried open.

Light—blinding as the sun—radiated from the box.

Followed by an explosion.

Cinder was thrown backward. The force knocked the wind from her. Her head rang like a bell.

The world around her went black.

She didn't know how long she lay there.

When she opened her eyes—minutes? Hours later?—her head was pounding. Her thoughts were disjointed. Her body felt heavy and sore. But her lungs were working, even if they burned at each shaky inhale, and her system diagnostics were quick to inform her that her body was functioning properly, more or less. Elevated heart rate, unusual power surges.

She blinked up into a clear blue sky. Smoke hung hazy in the air, and bits of dust and dirt were still floating down over the city.

And then there were the two unfamiliar faces peering down at her. A girl with tan skin, cropped black hair, and vibrant blue eyes, and a dark-skinned boy wearing thick-rimmed glasses.

“You all right?” asked the boy, holding his hand toward her. “Did you hit your head?”

“Where am I?” she asked, her words slurring. She took his hand and allowed him to pull her up to sitting. “What happened?”

“We're not sure,” said the girl. “We're trying to figure that out. But first, gotta take care of the bystanders.” She rolled her eyes good-naturedly, like this was a rule she found tedious. “Always the priority.”

The boy crouched down, putting himself close to Cinder's eye level. “I'm worried your add-ons might have reacted more severely to the explosion.”

“Add-ons?” she said. Then—seeing her hand, heavy with metal, she gasped. She lifted the hand. Flexed the fingers. Was shocked at how it obeyed her every command.

“I’m Insomnia, and this is Sketch,” said the girl. “What’s your name? Would you like us to call someone?”

“I...”

She hesitated.

Her name.

What was her name?

Her family?

Her friends?

Was there someone they should call?

Someone who cared about her?

Someone *she* cared about?

“I—I don’t know,” she stammered. “I don’t remember.”

The boy and girl exchanged looks.

“Nothing to worry about,” said the boy. *Sketch*. What strange names. Did she have an odd name like that, too? “We’ll take you down to headquarters, give you some time to recover. Maybe your amnesia will fade with time. And if not —”

Insomnia flashed a sympathetic smile. “Well, we can always use another cyborg on the team.”

Cyborg.

It was as good a name as any, she supposed. For now.

Sketch offered his hand with a bright smile. “Whoever you are, welcome to the Renegades.”

The end.

Chapter 22

Cinder ran after Magpie. Cars slammed on their brakes and tires screeched as she barreled across the street. A symphony of honks and shouts followed her, but she ignored them. In the distance, she watched Magpie ducking in and out of the crowd, moving with ease along the busy sidewalk.

The girl turned into a small city park. A festival of some sort was underway. Street musicians and performers were scattered among food trucks and tents selling everything from blown glass art to bird feeders.

Cinder had nearly reached her. “Stop! Thief!” she yelled, fists clenched.

When, ahead of her, the girl *did* stop.

With a wicked smirk on her lips, Magpie spun around to face Cinder. Before she sucked in a breath and screamed.

Literally, screamed, like the hounds of hell were upon her.

Cinder froze, baffled.

As did everyone around them.

“Villain!” Magpie yelled, pointing a finger at Cinder. “Anarchist! She’s chasing me! She’s trying to kill me!”

“Wha—kill you? That’s a bit melodramatic,” Cinder muttered.

But no one else seemed to see it that way.

It didn't take long for the crowd to surround her. It was a mob of angry faces, and as Cinder scanned their scowls and crossed arms, she began to suspect that this was not a normal weekend festival.

That this might not be a normal city.

Because everyone around her—*everyone*—was doing something that made her wonder if chasing after the girl might have been a mistake. From the woman with molten rock dripping from her open eyes to the man with a halo of crackling electricity over his head, to the little girl with vicious reptilian claws growing from her fingernails, to the boy with raven-black wings unfurling behind his back.

Cinder swallowed. “What kind of city *is* this?”

At the back of the crowd, Magpie cocked her head to one side and tossed Cinder's ring up into the air, catching it like a coin flip. The action—so careless with a ring that had been passed through generations of the Commonwealth royal family—set Cinder's teeth to grinding. “It's the kind of city where everyone is either a hero or a villain,” she said. Her voice darkened. “Guess which one you are.”

Cinder's eyes narrowed. “I've met plenty of both,” she said. “And believe me, I know exactly which one I am.”

The girl laughed, just as a voice barked, “You're under arrest!”

Cinder started to turn around, but then her arms were being grabbed and yanked behind her.

“For disturbing the peace,” added the voice.

She glanced over her shoulder, just as a good-looking Black boy with thick-framed glasses uncapped a marker with his teeth and started to *draw* on her wrists?

Cinder was about to ask what he thought he was doing, when he stopped drawing, and the next thing she knew, there were very real handcuffs around her wrist.

“What?” she said. “I didn’t do anything!”

“Magpie, you’re coming with us, too.”

Magpie flushed. “What? Why? Adrian—I mean, *Sketch*. She was chasing me!”

The boy shot her a warning look. “I wonder why,” he drawled. “We’ll get it sorted out down at the courthouse. No need to start a scene here. Come on, both of you.”

★ ★ ★

If Cinder should use her Lunar gift to get away, go to [Chapter 23](#).

If Cinder should go without a fight, go to [Chapter 50](#).

Chapter 23

“All right,” Cinder growled, irritation flaring inside her. “I’ve had quite enough of this.”

She inhaled, and forced herself to focus. Forced herself to notice the waves of bioelectricity cresting off the crowd around her. It had been a long time since she’d used her Lunar gift, but it was a bit like flying a spaceship—once you knew how, you never really forgot.

It wasn’t long before she could pick out the echoes of energy rolling off every person in that park. And yes, they were different from people she was used to. More vibrant. More powerful.

But that didn’t mean they couldn’t be manipulated.

She exhaled slowly, and seized control.

“You will release me,” she said.

A moment passed. Then the boy named Adrian *did* release her.

The handcuffs clicked open and fell to the grass at her feet.

At her silent command, the crowd around her began to back up, giving her space. All except Magpie, who stood gaping at her. She appeared to be trembling, but Cinder kept the girl’s feet planted to the ground. She wouldn’t let her run again.

Striding closer, Cinder lifted her palm.

With a gulp, Magpie set the ring into it.

Cinder huffed and slipped it back onto her finger. “Don’t steal,” she said through her teeth. “It’s a terrible habit.”

Magpie’s mouth thinned and her cheeks reddened, and Cinder had the distinct impression that she’d been scolded for this before. Probably many times over.

“Now *that* is a terrifying superpower.”

Cinder spun around.

It took her a moment to find the boy who had spoken. She wasn’t sure she would have noticed him at all, until he stepped forward, revealing himself. He had pale skin and fluffy brown hair and eyes that carried a strange wisdom. She thought he was probably close to the same age as Magpie, but it was difficult to tell. The way he carried himself suggested a maturity beyond his years.

But what was most striking to Cinder was that he was very much *not* under her control.

She could see his energy—feel it spooling off him just like everyone else.

But when she reached out for it, it slipped away from her grasp.

He was immune to the Lunar gift.

Immune to *her*.

Was he a shell? Did they have shells in ... in ...

She frowned, unable to remember the name of this city. Gotham? Gatling?

“Are you really an Anarchist?” the boy asked, sounding more curious than frightened. “I didn’t think there were any left.”

“I’m just trying to get home.”

The boy chuckled. “Honestly? At this point, I think we’d all kind of like you to go home. Especially since...” He

glanced past Cinder's shoulder, and she followed his look to the distant dig site, where some of the workers had just pulled a large box up from the excavation. "I have a feeling things are about to get really bad here."

Cinder frowned. "What do you mean?"

The boy shook his head. "Never mind. It sounds like maybe you've got your own problems to deal with." He nodded to the boy with the marker. "This is my big brother, Adrian. He's a good guy, I promise. If you release your control over him, he can draw you something that will help get you where you're supposed to go."

Cinder looked suspiciously at Adrian. "He just tried to arrest me."

"He won't this time. You have my word."

And even though Cinder wasn't sure she could trust anything about this strange city, somehow, she trusted this boy.

Exhaling, she let her control fall away—releasing not just Adrian, but everyone.

All around her, people seemed to shake themselves out of their stupors.

Magpie was the first to gather her wits. She glanced from Cinder to Adrian to the new boy.

"Hi, Magpie," he said.

She glared. "Max," she said, treating the word like a curse. "Always a pleasure." Her cheeks darkened even more. Then she pivoted on her heel and stomped away, fast disappearing around a corner.

Cinder scowled after her. "I think that girl might be trouble."

"Yeah," said Adrian. "We've noticed that. So, Max?" He glanced at the younger boy, who was still staring after Magpie

with a quizzical expression. But he gave himself a shake and turned to his brother. “What did you want me to draw?”

Max thought for a moment, then smiled. “How about ... a pumpkin carriage?”

Cinder guffawed. “A pumpkin *what?*”

“Trust me,” said Max. “I have a feeling it’s just the thing.”

As the crowd dispersed, shaking away the threads of Lunar control, Adrian uncapped his marker again and, to Cinder’s surprise, started to draw right onto the side of one of the canvas tents—even though it was clearly vandalism, and evidently he was a part of this city’s law enforcement.

But Cinder didn’t mention this, because she was too awestruck by his work. It took only seconds for his drawing to take shape—the large pumpkin with ornate vines curling over the top. Two horses harnessed at the front.

As soon as he was finished, Adrian passed a hand over the drawing and it came to life.

Cinder leaped back to make space. Because a second later, a real-life carriage, smelling distinctly of pumpkin pie, stood before her.

“There you are,” he said, with a pleased nod. He capped the marker and tucked it into his sleeve.

Max added, “I hope it takes you to where you need to go.”

Proceed to [Chapter 11](#).

Chapter 24

Cinder paced back and forth in her small prison, arms folded, ruminating over all that had happened since she had left New Beijing Palace that morning.

She was tired and frustrated and horrified that she wouldn't get out of here in time. What if she missed her own wedding? What if she never got her ring back? What would the newsfeeds say?

What would *Kai* say?

Her heart lurched. This was supposed to be one of the best days of her life. She checked the time on her brain interface, but something was malfunctioning, because it had been stuck at the same time all day. But it felt like she'd been gone from the palace for hours. Any minute now she was supposed to be stepping into the ballroom, making her way down the steps, and down the aisle that would take her to her groom. She could picture him, the way he looked so dashing and composed in red silk and gold embroidery, the dragon on his suit a complement to the phoenix on her gown. The way his smile made her heart skip, even after all these years.

But instead, she was trapped in some dungeon in—well, honestly, she wasn't entirely sure *where* she was.

With a huff, she spun back toward the lock on the door and bent down in front of it. A long time had passed since she'd been shut in here, and she was done waiting for someone to come let her out, to let her explain who she was and how she needed to be set free.

She had escaped from prison cells before. She could do it again.

Just as she started to inspect the lock, she heard footsteps and melodic whistling from somewhere beyond the door.

Her hair prickled on the back of her neck as she stood, considering.

If she was going to try and escape, she had to be fast, before whoever was coming could see her making a run for it and apprehend her again.

But—if she stayed, maybe whoever was coming would be reasonable. Maybe she could plead her case.

Maybe she could even get her ring back.

★ ★ ★

If Cinder should try to escape, go to [Chapter 39](#).

If Cinder should stay and plead her case, go to [Chapter 25](#).

Chapter 25

Though anger and frustration were swirling inside of her, Cinder forced herself to step away from the door. She had to trust that truth and justice were on her side. If she could just find someone in this place who had the tiniest bit of sense and tell them what happened, surely they would let her out and help her get her ring back.

The whistling grew louder, the tune sounding oddly familiar.

Cinder frowned, trying to place it, when the footsteps stopped right outside the door. She heard a lock in the key and felt her hopes rise.

She was already planning the speech that would persuade them to let her go when the door swung open and the words evaporated on her tongue.

“Iko?”

Iko beamed, twirling a set of old iron keys around her finger. “There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you. What on earth are you doing in this awful place on such an important day?”

“Honestly, I’ve been wondering the same thing.”

“Come on, come on.” Iko bounced on her toes and waved for Cinder to follow her. “We are *so* late. The wedding is going to start any minute!”

“They can’t exactly begin without me, can they?” said Cinder.

Iko scoffed. “A bit self-important, are we, now?”

Cinder scowled, but she was only too happy to leave the cell behind and follow Iko out into the corridor.

Except, as soon as she did, she froze and looked back and forth down the long hallway.

It looked different from when she’d first been brought here.

The walls were now a glimmering, glossy white, and through a picture window at the end of the hall she could see a night sky speckled with stars and ... not the moon, but *Earth* hanging over the horizon.

“Iko! How are we on Luna?”

“No time to explain!” Grabbing Cinder’s arm, Iko started racing through the halls of Artemisia Palace.

“But wait, Iko!” she gasped, trying—and failing—to slow them down. “I don’t have my ring! What will I tell Kai?”

Iko glanced back at her with a confused look. “Why would Kai care if you don’t have a ring?”

“Because I ... I...” Cinder trailed off as she and Iko arrived at a balcony overlooking the palace’s central ballroom. The floor below was filled with Artemisians in all their vibrant, outlandish finery, and the ceremony appeared to already be underway.

She frowned, trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

There was Kai, standing at the end of the altar.

And there was ... a bride. Sauntering slowly toward him, a white veil over her face.

“Wait.” Cinder grabbed the rail, her jaw unhinging. “Wh-what’s going on? Who is *that*?”

“The queen, of course,” said Iko, leaning over the balcony railing with a dreamy sigh. “Don’t you love weddings?”

They're so romantic. And let me tell you, these Lunars really know how to throw a classy shindig.”

But Cinder wasn't listening. Her gaze was trained on the bride. Horror wrapped around her insides as the woman reached the end of the aisle and Kai stepped forward to greet her. He was smiling—nervous, but happy—as he took the hem of the veil between his fingers and tenderly lifted it away from the bride's face.

Revealing Cinder's aunt—Queen Levana—underneath.

Cinder stumbled back from the rail and screamed.

Proceed to [Chapter 26](#).

Chapter 26

“Cinder! *Cinder!*”

Still screaming, Cinder lurched upward. Her hand shot out, preparing to strike whoever was grabbing her, but a hand stopped it in midair.

Her scream cut off.

Heart hammering, she blinked into the face that greeted her. Black hair, messy from sleep. Concerned brown eyes. Lips that every girl in the union had dreamed about a thousand times, though she was the only one lucky enough to actually kiss them.

“Kai,” she breathed. “What...? Where...? I thought...” Cinder swallowed hard to wet her dry throat, then looked around at the familiar bedroom that she and Kai had shared since the night of their wedding, years before.

“You were dreaming,” said Kai.

“It was a nightmare,” she said, breaths still ragged. “I was on Luna, and you were—” She cringed, not wanting to even mutter the words. “And before that—” She gave her head a shake as the bizarre dream already began to fade into random, nonsensical scraps. “I was locked in a prison cell, and Iko was wearing bunny ears, and I lost my wedding ring, and it was *awful.*”

Laughing, Kai lowered the hand that had tried to hit him and laced their fingers together. “You didn’t lose your wedding ring,” he said, running a thumb over the band. “But I can

absolutely see Iko wearing bunny ears. And probably starting an international trend.”

As her heart rate slowed, Cinder allowed herself a small laugh.

Leaning forward, Kai pressed a kiss to her brow. “Do you want to go back to sleep?” he asked. “Or should we sneak down to the kitchens and see what they’ve got for late-night stress-eating?”

This time, it was a real laugh that escaped her.

“I knew there was a reason I married you.”

The end.

Chapter 27

“And no one lived happily, forevermore. The end.”

Serilda smiled sweetly at her audience. All five children were staring up at her with looks of utter dismay.

“That wasn’t a happy ending!” cried Anna, looking particularly betrayed by the story’s conclusion.

Serilda shrugged. “Life doesn’t always end happily. Stories shouldn’t either.”

Fricz guffawed. “What’s the point of stories if they aren’t better than real life?”

“I agree,” said Fricz’s twin brother, Nickel, and this statement in itself was odd, as the two rarely agreed on much. “I was beginning to like that Cinder character. She deserved better.”

Serilda shrugged. “Perhaps we can start the story over tomorrow. I’ll let *you* decide what choices she makes. Maybe we can get her to a happier ending.” She stood, dusting the grass from her skirt. “It’s getting late, and there’s a full moon tonight. You should all be on your way home, before the wild hunt comes by and decides to kidnap you. The Erlking only takes the ones who stay out past curfew and don’t eat their boiled turnips, you know.” She reached out and teasingly pinched Hans’s cheeks.

Hans, the eldest of the group, swatted her hand away, even as his face flushed pink. “I’m too old to believe in ridiculous things like the Erlking. Save your threats for the littles. Come

on, Anna. I'll walk you home." He held out his hand for Anna to take, but she ignored it, preferring to skip down the road on her own. Grumbling, Hans chased after her.

"Shall I walk *you* home, Gerdrut?" asked Serilda, to the youngest of the group. Gerdrut nodded and wrapped her fingers around Serilda's, squeezing tight. It was only then that Serilda realized she hadn't said a single word since the story finished.

They bid farewell to the twins and began making their way through the fields and orchards. Serilda peered down at the girl's round face, lips twisted to one side in deep thought.

"And just what are you contemplating so intently?" asked Serilda, nudging the little girl with her hip.

At this, Gerdrut turned her eyes up to Serilda, frowning. "I have a question about the story you told."

"All right. Go on."

"I just wanted to know"—the girl hesitated, her frown becoming more pronounced—"what in the name of Wyrdith is a cyborg?"

The end.

Chapter 28

Cinder moved closer to the stone and reached out her hand. As her fingers neared the tiny red gem, it began to glow, lighting up like a firefly. It grew brighter with every step Cinder took, until all of this strange enchanted forest became nothing but brilliant light.

As her fingers neared the stone, she felt like she was standing on a precipice with nothing but emptiness dropping off in every direction. A powerful wind emerged from nowhere, buffeting against her from every angle.

She gritted her teeth, squinting against the light and the wind as she stretched her fingertips forward.

When she picked up the gem, all the world exploded.

Proceed to [Chapter 9](#).

Chapter 29

“Whatever,” Cinder muttered, stooping to pick up the giant die. She lifted it with both hands and gave it a toss. It rolled a few feet away, struck the stone, bounced back, and landed just in front of her again.

She had rolled a twenty.

She grinned smugly. “Nice.” She looked up at the strangers. “That’s good, right?”

The burly man, the sweet elf, and the grumpy demon-looking girl exchanged looks. They appeared exasperated, and maybe a tiny bit worried.

“Yeah,” grunted the horned girl. “That’s good. Obviously.”

“Maybe ... let’s try that again?” boomed the Game Master’s voice from the trees.

Shrugging, Cinder picked up the die and tossed it again.

Again, it landed on twenty.

She whooped.

Pru groaned. “Here we go again.”

“It just shouldn’t be possible,” muttered the voice. “One more time.”

“If you insist,” said Cinder. Again, she threw the die.

Again—twenty.

She fisted her hands on her hips and looked up toward the trees. “Why are we doing this, exactly?”

But before the disembodied voice, or anyone else's, could answer, Cinder felt a shift in her body. Almost as if she were being controlled by some Lunar mind manipulation, her stance started to change. Her feet widened. Her knees bent into a crouch, ready to spring. Her arms raised protectively before her face.

One of the fingers on her cyborg hand spun open, ejecting the sharp and dangerous-looking stiletto knife.

No longer smiling, she glared at the three strangers.

They stared back.

Even the barbarian boy, with all his muscles, gulped loudly.

Proceed to [Chapter 49](#).

Chapter 30

Cinder braced herself, shut her eyes, climbed through the looking glass ...

And promptly fell face-first off a ledge.

She landed in an inelegant heap on plush carpet.

Catching her breath, she opened first one eye, and then the other. Relief swirled inside of her as she took in her familiar quarters in New Beijing Palace. The same vanity, the same wardrobe, the same wedding gown hanging on the door, waiting for her.

Beaming, she got to her feet and checked the time on her interface.

Hardly any time at all had passed! She hadn't missed her wedding and all would be well and—

“Cinder!”

She yelped and spun around to see Iko standing in the doorway, arms akimbo and a look of utter disgust on her face. “What have you done to your hair? And you're not even dressed yet!”

“I'm sorry,” said Cinder. “I've been, um, dealing with things.”

“Dealing with things?” Iko threw her arms into the air. “You're supposed to be *dealing* with getting married! Honestly, I leave you alone for five minutes! Come on, sit down. I'll fix your hair.”

Knowing better than to argue, Cinder settled down on the vanity seat, wondering whether she had dozed off. Could it have been a dream?

As Iko took out the peony flower and the pins and began combing her hair, Cinder found herself fidgeting with her ring finger. Her heart jolted, and she looked down.

The ring was missing.

Gasping, she looked up into her own horrified expression in the mirror.

But her attention was almost immediately diverted to Iko's reflection ... and the white rabbit ears now sprouting up from among her blue braids.

In the mirror, Iko gave her a wink. "We have to hurry. You wouldn't want to be late!"

The end.

Chapter 31

Ignoring the ghost's outstretched hand, Cinder hopped up into the driver's seat of the pumpkin carriage and grabbed the horses' reins. "You don't mind, do you?"

There was no answer.

When she glanced back, the ghost wasn't there.

She frowned, swiveling her head side to side, but he was nowhere to be seen. Had he climbed inside the carriage?

"Uh—I'm just going to get going then, right?" she called loudly. "And you can call out directions as needed?"

When there was no answer, Cinder shrugged and cracked the reins. The horses started off down the long driveway. She considered the day's itinerary. First, she would go meet with this Erlking guy, see what he wanted, maybe give him an invitation to the wedding? She wondered if that was what this was all about. Perhaps, being a king (supposedly), he was annoyed to have been left out. The Commonwealth's relations with other leaders and political allies was strong, but she knew those relationships didn't just happen. They required effort. And as the almost empress, that sort of diplomacy would once again be among her official duties.

She determined that she would resolve this issue quick and gracefully, and make it back with plenty of time to spare. She wasn't about to start her reign with some diplomatic controversy hanging over her head.

At the bottom of the long hill, the horses turned away from the sparkling city of New Beijing, toward the dense forest at its outskirts. They seemed to know where they were going, and the unseen ghost still hadn't said anything, so she didn't try to stop them. Soon the carriage was passing beneath a dense tree canopy, the branches alive with birdsong and spring flowers. The air smelled sweetly of moss and she could hear a gurgling brook not far off.

It was all perfectly lovely.

Until Cinder began to realize that she'd been driving for longer than she'd expected, and the woods were now growing thicker, the trees warping into gnarled trunks hung with tendrils of wispy vines. The pleasant birdsong was replaced with the shrill cries of a raven and the clatter of branches as the wind whipped through.

She came to a crossroads, where a sign had long ago rotted away. She could see its arrows pointing in either direction, but not what they would have been pointing to.

She glanced down the road to her left. An arch made of knotted twigs and moss hung over the road, and a haze of fog was creeping along the path. In the distance, she could make out a group of three travelers, on foot. She squinted, wishing she could see more clearly, because, from this far away, they appeared to be dressed strangely in medieval garb and weaponry.

Cinder glanced in the other direction. The road was better lit there, and soon opened up into what appeared to be a lush green lawn surrounded by rosebushes dotted with bloodred blooms. She heard the sounds of laughter and the clinking of crystal and porcelain, as if a garden party was well underway.

★ ★ ★

If Cinder goes to talk to the travelers, go to [Chapter 20](#).

If Cinder goes to the rose garden, go to [Chapter 4](#).

Chapter 32

Clenching her hand into a fist, Cinder turned to face the Erlking once more. “I appreciate the offer to send me home through your magical-mirror-portal thing, but that ghost? The poltergeist? He took my engagement ring, and I want it back. I’m not leaving without it.”

The Erlking’s gaze flashed with annoyance, but before he could speak, another voice rang out through the tower.

“Do you mean *this* engagement ring?”

Cinder swiveled toward one of the diamond-leaded-glass windows. She was sure it had been closed before, but now the glass stood wide-open, and the boy perched on the windowsill *definitely* hadn’t been there when last she’d looked.

He was holding up a ring—*her* ring.

But it wasn’t the red-haired boy from before.

This boy was dressed all in black and wore a three-pointed jester’s hat. Wisps of raven-black hair poked out from beneath the hat, and thick kohl had been painted around his eyes, dripping down to form a heart on one cheek. Strangest of all was his eyes, which were as bright yellow as the petals of a sunflower.

With a grin, he tossed the ring up into the air as one might flip a coin. Cinder gasped, sure it would fall out the tower window and get lost in whatever garden or moat lay below, but the boy caught it with ease.

“Who are you?” drawled the Erlking, with a voice hovering between curiosity and boredom. “And what are you doing in my castle?”

“And what are you doing with my ring?” Cinder added. Holding out her palm, she marched toward the boy.

“My sincerest apologies,” he said, twirling the ring on the tip of his finger, sending flickers of light across the tower walls, “but I’m afraid I’ll be keeping it. I rather need it, you see.”

Then, with a bow, he stepped back off the window ledge.

Cinder gasped. “No—!”

But rather than fall, the boy transformed into a silky-winged raven. Clutching her ring in its talons, the raven took off with a caw, flying past the castle’s walls, the drawbridge, and over the forest beyond.

Cinder let out an aggravated scream, and was met with an equally aggravated growl.

She looked down.

There, just below the window, its claws digging into the tower’s stone wall, was an enormous beast—all shadows and talons, glossy scales and pitch-black wings.

“A Jabberwock,” murmured the Alder King. Cinder started. She hadn’t heard him approach, and now he stood at her side, peering down at the monster with greedy eyes. “It would make a marvelous piece in my collection. I could mount its head in the great room.”

The creature snorted and looked from Cinder and the king to the raven, which was growing smaller in the distance with every passing moment.

Cinder’s jaw tensed. She had to follow that bird. A carriage would be far too slow, but perhaps a horse could give

chase, if she didn't lose the bird in the time it took her to get one ...

She was just about to turn back to the Alder King, when the Jabberwock bristled, and Cinder could see it preparing to launch itself off the tower and give chase to the raven.

Was it possible there was another way to get her ring back after all?

★ ★ ★

If Cinder asks for a horse, go to [Chapter 34](#).

If Cinder jumps onto the Jabberwock's back, go to [Chapter 33](#).

Chapter 33

Cinder had done many courageous things in her life, things that many might have considered foolish at times. This wasn't even the first time she'd jumped from a castle tower many stories high.

But never had she jumped out of a castle tower onto the back of an enormous flying monster.

And yet, with her brain interface flickering with warning upon warning about elevated heart rate and extreme levels of adrenaline, Cinder made her choice.

Without giving herself time to change her mind, she braced her hands on the windowsill and leaped—right as the Jabberwock took flight.

Proceed to [Chapter 51](#).

Chapter 34

As the beast beneath the window opened its mouth and gave a hungry snap with its teeth, Cinder cringed and slowly backed away. In the next moment, the monster had lurched from the stone wall and spread its enormous wings. As it took off after the raven, Cinder, breathless, turned back to face the Erlking.

“I need to find that raven. Do you have a horse I can use?”

An intrigued eyebrow shot upward. “A horse?”

“Yeah, well. A podship would be better, but something tells me one of those is going to be hard to come by around here.”

“More of your strange words ... but, yes. I do, in fact, have some of the finest steeds in all the realm. Follow me.”

“Great. Let’s hurry. That bird is getting away.”

He chuckled dryly as he swept from the tower room, back down the spiraling steps, through the great room and out into the main courtyard, lined with stables. And as if he had willed them into being, two enormous black horses stood at the gates. They wore no saddles, no harnesses or bridles, but the Erlking did not hesitate to pull himself with a serpent’s grace onto the back of one of the beasts.

Cinder paused. She wasn’t exactly a skilled rider, and this horse looked like it was built for war. It breathed steam through its nostrils—or was that smoke? And its eyes when they met hers were empty. Soulless.

But it did look *fast*, and it was her best chance to get her ring back.

A stable boy scurried forward and set down a stool beside the steed. Squaring her shoulders, Cinder stepped up and swung herself onto the horse's back, with not nearly as much agility as the Erlking had, but she pretended it was the fault of her cumbersome prosthetics.

“All right,” she said, gripping the horse's mane. “Let's go.”

“Yes,” said her companion. “*Let's.*”

Something in his tone gave her pause. When Cinder looked over at him, she was startled to see they were no longer alone. An entire contingent of leather-clad warriors had joined them, carrying an assortment of weapons, from crossbows and pikes to broadswords and daggers. Though none of them were quite as striking as their dark leader, they were all achingly handsome, with sharp bone structures and wide eyes that shone like gems.

“Wh—who are these people?” she said, feeling a bit like a lamb that had just been led to slaughter.

“My hunters,” said the Erlking. The castle's drawbridge groaned as it was lowered, revealing the distant forest. “Perhaps I was wrong before. Perhaps I do have some use for you after all.” His teeth glinted in the moonlight. “Welcome to the wild hunt.”

“The wild wha—?” Cinder's question devolved into a yelp as her horse charged forward, following the Erlking's steed over the bridge. Hooves thundered, and a pack of feral hounds swarmed beneath them, their howls and yaps echoing into the night. The world passed by in a blur of shadows and thunder.

Continue to [Chapter 53](#).

Chapter 35

As the Jabberwock tossed its head side to side, Cinder braced herself and jumped from its back. She landed in the thick mud on her hands and knees, sinking up to her wrists with a slurp and squelch.

Catching her breath, she looked up and found herself face-to-face with a pumpkin.

The same leering, slightly decaying pumpkin that now wore the three-pointed jester's hat.

Shoving herself to her feet, Cinder snatched the hat off the pumpkin with a growl, not caring if she smeared mud all over it. It'd serve that boy right for stealing her ring!

"Cath! Jest!" yelled a new voice.

She followed the sound to see a well-dressed young man with white hair and a ridiculous top hat running toward them.

"Hatta, thank heavens," breathed Cath. "The hat. You have to get to Jest's hat! It—" She cut off, seeing that Cinder was already holding the hat that was suddenly, evidently, very important.

Frowning, Cinder looked down at the hat in her hand. With its points hanging limply, it didn't seem remarkable at all.

"Oh no," said Jest. "Oh no, oh no. The ring!"

Startled, Cinder whipped around. Jest was busily searching the mess of pumpkin vines at his feet, completely ignoring the

large man who was straining to yank the ax lodged in the outer shell of one of the larger pumpkins.

Not to mention the humongous monster.

Wasn't anyone else bothered by the monster?

But just as she was thinking it, Cinder spotted a tiny sparkle amid the filth.

Her ring!

“You! With the hand ... thing.”

She looked up. The man called Hatta was panting hard from his sprint across the pumpkin patch. His eyes were wild with panic.

“We need the Vorpel Sword,” he said, gesturing to the hat in Cinder's hand. “Quick, throw the hat to Cath! She's the only one who can get it!”

Cinder frowned, trying to make sense of his words. Was he suggesting that there was a sword *inside* the hat?

★ ★ ★

If Cinder should reach inside the hat, go to [Chapter 17](#).

If Cinder should forget the hat and get the ring, go to [Chapter 36](#).

Chapter 36

Cinder dropped the hat. It landed softly in the mud as she dove for the ring. She had just scooped it up from the muck and slid it back onto her finger when she heard Hatta exclaim—

“She has the Vorpall Sword! It-it answered to her. But how?”

“Could she be another queen?” said the girl in red. “Jest, it will answer to a queen, won’t it?”

“She must be,” said the jester. “But wait. Look! There are *two* of them!”

Inhaling a breath of relief to be reunited with her ring, Cinder spun around to see what they were all going on about.

But what she saw sent a cascade of ice down her spine.

She didn’t know what to make of it. It didn’t make sense. It wasn’t possible. And yet—

There *she* was. Standing not far from the spot that she’d been standing in mere moments ago.

Except, this other Cinder was gripping the jester’s black hat in one hand, and a sword in the other.

“Is this a Lunar mind trick?” she muttered, wondering if she was trapped in some sick thaumaturge illusion. But no—if that was the case, her lie detector should have been blaring long ago.

And yet, if this was real, then *who* was that other Cinder? And what was she doing with a sword?

The monster screeched, as if annoyed to have been forgotten. It lifted up on its back legs and roared at the sky, and when it came back down, the ground thundered beneath Cinder's feet.

“Kill it!” cried the girl in red, turning her blazing eyes on the other Cinder. “You must end this! You must slay the Jabberwock!”

As Cinder stared, her doppelgänger tightened her grip on the sword's hilt and charged into the fray. The monster's head swiveled in her direction. Its eyes glowed as steam burst from its nostrils. It released an ear-splitting screech that startled a flock of blackbirds that had been picking at seeds in the back corner of the pumpkin patch.

With a grunt, the other Cinder plunged the sword upward. It cut through the beast's flesh. The monster howled. She slashed the blade down through its abdomen, flaying it open. Blood sprayed across her hands, her legs, pooling in the muddy muck beneath them.

With a keening wail, the Jabberwock collapsed, eyes roving madly from side to side before rolling back into its head as its body convulsed one final time.

Which is when the man with the ax went mad.

The other Cinder had just dropped the sword when the large man started swinging his ax, and everywhere he swung, gore and death followed. First, the jester. Then, the girl in red. Next, the man in the top hat.

Cinder's gut sank with every passing moment. She felt like she was watching it all through a nightmare, her feet stuck in the mud, unable to move, barely able to breathe.

Which is when the man turned on her.

Well—the *other* her.

“Why are you wasting your time here?”

Gasping, Cinder swiveled her head. Iko was perched on top of a pumpkin, legs crossed, white bunny ears flopped over her braids. She was watching the events unfolding across the pumpkin patch with distaste. “This is like one of those tragic net dramas where everyone dies at the end.” She turned to Cinder. “We don’t have time for this. You are *so* late. Come on!”

Hopping down from the pumpkin, she leaped through the patch’s gate.

Dazed, Cinder stumbled after her.

She glanced back once, in time to see the man picking up the sword and aiming the blade at the other Cinder’s heart.

With a shudder, she turned away, wishing she would wake up from this nightmare, and followed Iko through the gate.

Proceed to [Chapter 48](#).

Chapter 37

“That is enough of that,” Cinder growled, as the Jabberwock flung its neck back, trying to buck her off. She held fast, and this time, she took a long, deep breath to calm her thoughts—then reached out, searching for the waves of bioelectricity that shimmered off all living things. Over generations, Lunars like her had developed the ability to control and manipulate this force, and while she’d never attempted to use it on an *animal* before ... there was a first time for everything.

The energy spooling off the Jabberwock was frenetic, like a brewing thunderstorm. As soon as Cinder seized control of it with her mind, she felt a spark between them—a literal spark that seemed to zip through her wiring up into her brain. It startled her, but she did not release her control.

Miraculously, the monster began to calm. Its writhing muscles stilled beneath her. Its screeches died out. Its shuddering breaths slowed.

“That’s better,” Cinder murmured, straining from the effort of managing such frantic energy. “No need to eat anyone today. Let’s all pause and—”

A distant sound interrupted her. Something like a throbbing hum, a whir, a low whistle, coming from the sky.

It was a sound Cinder had heard many times before, but that couldn’t be right.

How could it be *here*?

And yet, when she peered through the shroud of mist that hung over the pumpkin patch, she saw a row of descending lights. As those lights neared, they revealed the hulking metal form they were attached to, and there was no mistaking the shape of Thorne's beloved spaceship—the Rampion.

Dropping right toward them.

Cinder wasn't sure if the ship's distraction prompted her to lose control of the Jabberwock, or if the monster's fear lent it enough strength to shirk off her manipulation, but the next moment, she was being hurled from its back.

Cinder's body smacked an overgrown pumpkin. Its flesh gave slightly as she slid down into the muck mottled with braided vines.

The Rampion landed in the center of the field. A dozen jack-o'-lantern faces contorted into looks of panic moments before they were squashed beneath the landing gear.

The Jabberwock snarled—first at the ship, and then at Cinder. A hungry gleam returned to its eye as it began sloshing through the mud in Cinder's direction, its dripping tongue smearing drool along a mouth full of fangs.

Behind it, the ship's entry ramp opened, descending with a hiss and a thud. Two figures appeared in the glowing lights.

“I promise to show you the whole world,” rang out Thorne's voice, “and you want to see the saddest pumpkin patch of all time?”

“Hush,” said Cress, smacking him on the arm. “Look, there she is! I told you that new tracker was accurate.”

Cinder wanted to feel relief at seeing her friends, but the Jabberwock had prowled so close she could smell the stink of its breath. Distantly, she thought she could hear more arguing from the other people in the patch—the man with the ax yelling something about his wife, the girl in red hollering

about a prophecy—but she was too focused on the monster keen on devouring her to pay them much attention.

“A little help?” she cried, her words strung with tension.

“Of course!” said Cress. “We’ve got just what you need. Here, catch!”

Cinder glanced away from the Jabberwock long enough to see something small and round sailing toward her—and plopping into the mud nowhere near close enough to reach.

“Oops,” said Cress.

“Cinder, don’t eat that,” said Thorne. “I don’t even want to know what sorts of germs are thriving in a place like this.” He shuddered.

“What is it?” Cinder said, trying to push herself back, but her ankles kept slipping, her hands kept sinking.

“A macaron,” said Cress. “Scarlet made them. Hold on, we’ve got more.” She disappeared into the body of the ship.

Cinder frowned. “Scarlet can bake?”

“We were surprised, too,” said Thorne.

Cress reappeared. “Here!”

“Wait, let me,” said Thorne. Then—“Here!”

He threw another cookie.

Cinder reached her hand up to catch it ...

But it landed with a soft kerplunk right next to the first one.

“Oops,” said Thorne.

Cinder groaned, remembering why it had always seemed so much easier to just save herself.

“Look!” she yelled, pointing in the direction of the group of people, just as the boy in black—Jest, had the girl called

him?—did an impressive backflip onto the top of a house-size pumpkin. “There’s a, um, pumpkin. Pie? A pumpkin pie!”

Surprisingly, it worked. The Jabberwock’s head swiveled in the direction she was pointing, giving Cinder just enough time to roll away from its clawed front legs and push herself to her feet. The path to the Rampion was still blocked. She was about to dive for cover behind another humongous pumpkin, when Thorne cried out—“Catch!”

She looked up in time to see the cookie flying toward her head.

Cinder snatched it from the air.

The macaron was orange with green frosting on the inside, and smelled distinctly of spiced pumpkin. White frosting piped onto the top read, EAT ME.

Cinder made a face. “Did it have to be pumpkin?”

But there was little time to think. Evidently having determined there wasn’t really any pumpkin pie to be had, the Jabberwock turned on her once more. This time, still hungry, and now furious.

It screamed and hurtled across the patch, right for Cinder. Jaws open, ready to devour her whole.

* * *

If Cinder should eat the cookie, go to [Chapter 41](#).

If Cinder should give the cookie to the Jabberwock, go to [Chapter 38](#).

Chapter 38

As the Jabberwock bore down on Cinder, mouth gaping, she threw the cookie into its maw.

The monster reeled back in surprise, then gave a little cough, emitting a blast of orange smoke from its nostrils.

Its eyes narrowed, staring at Cinder with rage.

A rage that quickly gave way to confusion.

Then bewilderment.

Then—something like wide-eyed joy.

And then, the monster began to change.

As Cinder stared, the Jabberwock's tail shrank and disappeared. Taloned claws turned to skinny-fingered hands. Scales to pale skin.

In a matter of seconds, the ferocious beast became ... a woman. Though not old, she seemed frail and ill, with dark spots beneath her eyes and pale skin stretched over sharp bones.

The huge man dropped the ax. "You—you're back. You're —" His voice wobbled. As he and the woman stared at each other, it seemed for a moment like they might embrace.

But then her wonder shifted to disgust. "You locked me up in a pumpkin!" she yelled in a hoarse voice. "And then you were going to start feeding *people* to me! Actual people! I'm not a cannibal, Peter!"

He opened his palms wide. “I had to! You were rampaging all over the countryside. I didn’t know what else to do. I couldn’t let you starve!”

Flushing pink, the woman gave a furious shake to her head, crossed her arms, then started stomping away toward the little cottage at the edge of the pumpkin patch. The man followed after her, spurring apologies that she seemed disinclined to listen to, at least anytime soon.

“Cath!” cried a female voice.

Cinder turned to see a tall blond girl emerging from behind an enormous pumpkin. Beside her stood a man in an executioner’s hood, carrying his own vicious-looking ax.

“Mary Ann! You’re all right!” cried Cath, the girl in red.

As the two embraced, the executioner transformed into a silky-winged raven and flew over to perch on the jester’s shoulder.

“A tale that long has ended in gore,” the Raven squawked, “shall thus be changed forevermore.”

“What happened?” asked Mary Ann, gaping up at the Rampion. “What *is* that thing?”

Cress and Thorne waved cheerfully.

“I think,” said the jester, picking up his fallen hat and settling it back onto his head, “that hulking flying machine and the girl with the strange metal appendage might have just saved the day.”

“Jest,” breathed Cath, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears. “Did we—Do you think—” She swallowed hard, peering from the jester to the man in the top hat. “Did we escape our destiny? Hatta, did we beat the prophecy?”

“Not sure, love,” said the man in the top hat—Hatta. “But I know in all the drawings the sisters have done, I’ve never seen anything like *that*.” He nodded toward the Rampion.

Cath let out a shaky sob. With hesitant steps, she and Jest drew near, taking hold of each other's hands. "You're alive," she breathed.

He started to smile, as if he himself could hardly believe it. "And you're not a queen."

"And Hatta"—Cath turned toward their friend—"well, he's still only *sort of* mad."

Hatta winked.

"I don't mean to sound petty," said Mary Ann, crossing her arms, "but am I to understand that Peter Peter locked me up in a pumpkin shell and planned to feed me to the Jabberwock and we're just going to let that go? Shouldn't there be some sort of justice? A retaliation?"

Uncomfortable looks were exchanged.

"Well," started Cath. "I suppose we could mention it to the king, but you know how he is—"

"Or," said Jest, with a one-shouldered shrug, "perhaps we let bygones be bygones. You can come with us to Chess. You and Cath can start your bakery, and ... just maybe, we'll all get to live happily ever after?"

Mary Ann looked around, her face brightening as the possibilities dawned on her. "Yes," she breathed, beaming at Cath, who beamed back. "Yes. Let's do that."

"How about you, Cinder?" said Cress. "Are you ready to go home?"

Cinder laughed. "Yes! Please get me the heck out of here!"

But as she was rushing up to the top of the ship's ramp, she hesitated. Something made her turn around, to peer down at the strange group left behind in that mucky pumpkin patch. The hatter, the jester, the raven, the maid, and the girl who looked an awful lot like a queen, despite the mud covering her

gown. She couldn't help feeling like something was being left ... unfinished.

Proceed to [Chapter 40](#).

Chapter 39

Cinder made a derisive sound in the back of her throat. She could get out of here. She'd gotten out of plenty of prison cells on her own before, some way more heavily protected than this one.

Feeling newly determined, she knelt down in front of the lock and released the stiletto knife and screwdriver attachments in her cyborg hand. She listened carefully to the internal mechanisms as she wriggled the tools inside, until—

Click.

With a satisfied grin, she opened the door, revealing an empty corridor outside.

She glanced back once, but the room where she'd been trapped was now, inexplicably, empty.

What a bizarre place, she thought, before choosing a direction and hurrying down the hall.

She hadn't gotten far when she spotted a figure in the distance. She froze, preparing for a fight—but the figure was perfectly still. Not *standing*, but rather chained to the wall.

Her stomach dropped. It was the boy from before. The same boy who had taken her ring! Only now, his limbs were strung up in thick golden chains.

And the ring—*her* ring—was dangling from a leather braid around his neck.

He appeared unconscious. Cinder hesitated, wondering if she should try to help him.

But no. She had to help herself. She had to get out of here.

Though she felt a little guilty about it all, she untied the leather braid and slipped the ring onto her finger, then hurried away, hoping that whoever he was, he would be all right.

She continued on until she saw a door with bright sunlight filtering through the windows to either side. Hope rose inside of her as she rushed forward and shoved it open.

Proceed to [Chapter 4](#).

Chapter 40

“I am *so* ready to leave,” said Cinder, “but something doesn’t feel quite right.”

“You know, I was just thinking that same thing,” said Thorne. He stroked his fingers down the side of his face, staring down at the group in the pumpkin patch. “Say, did you say something about starting a bakery?”

Cath nodded. “Mary Ann and I have been dreaming about it for years. It’s clear that we can’t bring that dream to reality here in Hearts, but maybe, in Chess...”

“And, this Chess ...,” said Thorne, “is it a nice place?”

Jest and Hatta exchanged looks.

“Not particularly nice,” admitted Jest.

“Think constant war, inept rulers, and an utter lack of sense,” added Hatta.

Mary Ann shuddered. “Not much better than Hearts, then.”

“Well,” said Cinder, “perhaps you could come with us? The Earthen Union has been at peace for over a century.”

“And our rulers are both competent and likeable,” said Cress.

“Plus,” added Cinder, “the market in New Beijing has been lacking a good bakery for years.”

“What do you say?” said Thorne.

Looks were traded. Hopeful silences were considered. Uncertainty was replaced with hopeful smiles.

“What about a hat shop?” said Hatta. “Do people in this New Beijing place have much fashion sense?”

Cinder laughed. “Just wait until you meet my best friend. You and Iko will get along great.”

“Well, then.” Hatta took out a pocket watch. “I’ve been running from Time for so long. Why stop now?”

He strode up the ramp into the ship, and was followed fast by a giddy Mary Ann.

Jest lifted Cath’s hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss to her thumb. Her eyes glistened.

“We beat the prophecy,” she whispered. “We can be together.”

“Finally,” he whispered back. He glanced at the bird perched on his shoulder. “What do you say, Raven? Shall we embark on a new adventure?”

The raven cawed. “With good friends and a life full of laughter, what else can we ask for, but happy ever after?”

Together, they boarded the ship and took off toward the stars.

Proceed to [Chapter 8](#).

Chapter 41

Cinder squeezed her eyes shut and bit into the macaron.

She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, but it definitely wasn't *this*.

The macaron was heaven distilled into sugar and almond. It crumbled beneath her teeth, then melted on her tongue. Cinder moaned, sure she'd never tasted anything so delectable.

Just as she polished off the cookie, she felt her body changing.

Transforming.

Shrinking.

She had hardly blinked before all the world altered around her. Everything else grew enormous—

While she became as small as a mouse.

Once the world stopped shifting and her body's size seemed to regulate, Cinder glanced around, amazed at how different everything looked from this point of view.

Until she turned in a full circle and spied—*herself*, staring back.

She gasped and, adrenaline running high, prepared to attack the impostor. But the impostor made the same surprised face and sank into a perfect imitation of Cinder's stance.

A reflection, she realized. Stepping closer, she studied herself in the mirror—what must have been a small hand

mirror left in the dirt. She looked haggard from all the running around and general absurdity of her day, but she could deal with looking haggard.

“What am I supposed to do now?” she said, pressing a hand against the mirror’s smooth surface.

But she leaned against it too hard, and the next moment, she had tumbled straight through the glass.

Proceed to [Chapter 30](#).

Chapter 42

Hauling back her arm, Cinder threw the hat as hard as she could. It landed with a dull thud just out of reach of the girl in the striped gown. The girl scrabbled toward it. The moment she had grabbed the hat, she shoved her hand inside—

And when she pulled it out, she was gripping the hilt of glimmering sword.

Cinder's jaw dropped.

The Jabberwock screeched, a sound that could have split the earth for all its fury and terror.

In the next moment, the Jabberwock was lurching for the girl, jaw unhinged.

The girl rolled onto her back and swung the sword in a clean arc. It sliced through the Jabberwock's neck. A spray of blood dotted the girl's dress and the pumpkins beside her. The monster's head fell to the ground and tumbled a few feet away, while its humongous body collapsed to the mud, barely missing the girl's form beneath.

For a moment, the pumpkin patch was still, as if even the rotting gourds were holding their breaths.

“Cath...” It was the boy in black who had spoken, his voice wavered, breathless with relief. “Are you all right?”

Dazed, the girl looked toward him. She used the skirt of her gown to wipe away a smear of blood from her chin. With a shaky nod, she pulled herself to her feet, yanking one edge of her skirt out from beneath the monster's weight. She still

gripped the sword handle, but now had its tip dug into the dirt, more for support than a weapon.

“It’s done,” she said. “It’s over.”

“You ... you *killed* her.” The man with the ax was swaying on his feet, staring at the monster’s headless form. “You murderer. You monster!” Slowly, his look of utter defeat began to change. From despair to rage. His nostrils flared. His knuckles whitened.

“No, that was the monster!” shouted Cath, pointing at the Jabberwock. “And you were going to feed my maid to her! You are the murderer!”

“I would leave now ... if I were you.”

Cinder jumped and glanced around. She didn’t know who had spoken. It had sounded close, but there was no one near her. “Hello? Who said that?”

“Down here.”

She glanced down and found herself staring into the horrified expression of a jack-o’-lantern. It was lit by a candle on the inside, but the wick was growing short, and the flame flickered weakly in an attempt to stay alive.

“This next part is very, very sad,” the pumpkin said, its expression growing more pained by the second. *“I don’t think you will want to see.”*

Cinder glanced back at the gate she had entered through. But now, on the other side of it, she could see a graveyard—tidy tombstones in neat, grassy rows, a stark contrast to the mucky chaos of the pumpkin patch.

“You will pay for this,” growled the man with the ax. “I will make sure you all pay!”

★ ★ ★

If Cinder should head for the gate, go to [Chapter 45](#).

If Cinder should join the fight, go to [Chapter 44](#).

Chapter 43

Just as the monster was unhinging its jaw, ready to devour the fallen man, Cinder let out a roar and charged into the fray.

The monster's head swiveled in her direction. Its eyes glowed and steam burst from its nostrils. It snarled and turned to face her full-on, releasing an ear-splitting screech that startled a flock of blackbirds picking at seeds in the back corner of the pumpkin patch.

Cinder gritted her teeth. Squeezed the sword's handle.

The monster lunged for her.

The heat from its breath burst across her skin, smelling of squash and char.

With a grunt, Cinder plunged the sword into its gut. It cut through the beast's flesh as easily as engine sludge. The monster howled. Cinder slashed the blade down through its abdomen, flaying it open. Blood sprayed across her hands, her legs, pooling in the muck beneath them.

With a keening wail, the Jabberwock collapsed, eyes roving madly from side to side before rolling back up into its head as its body convulsed one final time.

Blinking fast to clear her vision, Cinder released the sword. It fell into the pool of gore with a sickening thud. Distantly, she heard a yell, thick with rage, howling with revenge.

She started to turn, and the sight that greeted her made her freeze.

The man with the ax was rampaging through the pumpkin patch. A blink—and he had swung his weapon at Jest, cleaving his head from his shoulders. A roar and he was throwing the weapon at the girl in red. It caught her in the chest, right in her heart. A gasp and he was lifting an enormous pumpkin and hurling it toward the man in the top hat, burying him beneath broken flesh and slime.

Then he was charging toward Cinder.

Heart stuttering, Cinder fumbled to unlock one of the tools in her hand that she might be able to use against him. She took a step back and tripped on one of the dead Jabberwock's outstretched legs. She fell backward into a circle of pumpkins. Their faces all turned toward her, vicious and taunting, but she kept her gaze glued to the man.

He paused just long enough to pick up the sword—

Then he snarled and drove it straight through her.

Proceed to [Chapter 27](#).

Chapter 44

Cinder may have had only a faint idea of what was happening, but she did know that it was never a good thing when someone started screaming about revenge while wielding a gigantic ax.

The man's grip tightened on the ax handle. He took a step toward the boy in black, sneering an ugly, murderous sneer.

Which is when Cinder stooped and picked up the nearest pumpkin. She hurled it as hard as she could at the man's back.

It struck him in one shoulder.

He stumbled with a grunt, but regained his balance and whirled back to face Cinder.

"Just a warning," said Cinder, bending down to pick up another gourd, "my fiancé is *way* better at talking things through than I am."

The man glowered at her, his nostrils flaring.

Then, with a roar, he pulled back the ax and threw it, end over end, as someone might throw a hatchet during target practice.

Cinder barely had time to register what he'd done.

The glint of the blade—flying straight toward her.

She didn't have time to duck.

It happened so fast, she didn't even feel it. Flesh and wires alike, severed in one clean cut.

And then—nothing.

Proceed to [Chapter 27](#).

Chapter 45

Cinder turned away, shaking her head. She didn't know what she'd just stumbled upon, but it was clear that this was a disaster, and she wanted nothing more to do with it.

She picked her way over the vines and pumpkins.

But as she set her hand on the gate and it opened with a groan and squeak, she couldn't help looking back—just in time to see the large man pivot and swing the ax.

Cinder shuddered, horrified, as the blade cut clear through the neck of the man in black.

Cath's scream echoed, startling a flock of blackbirds. By the time they had dispersed through the sky, the man had dropped the ax and taken off running for the distant forest, chased by Cath's wails and a single raven.

Cinder hesitated, her heart in her throat. The part of her that craved justice felt a pull toward that forest.

But another part of her knew that this wasn't her fight. It wasn't her story.

She had her own ending to get to.

Swallowing back the bile in her throat, she turned away.

Proceed to [Chapter 19](#).

Chapter 46

“Let’s all just take a moment, shall we?” said Cinder. “I don’t know who any of you are. I don’t understand what’s happening here. I’m just trying to get back to New Beijing so I can marry the love of my life and I’m really frustrated at how the whole world seems to be against that happening right now. So let’s take a breath and figure this out.”

She was proud of herself as she bent down and set the sword neatly on top of the nearest pumpkin, then backed away from it—a show of peace and diplomacy. She liked to think that Kai’s gift for reasoning with people was starting to rub off on her.

And for a long moment, she was convinced that it was working. Everyone in the pumpkin patch stared at her—curious and uncertain. Even the Jabberwock.

“Now then,” said Cinder. “Why don’t you start by telling me what is this all about?”

The girl in the gown stood taller, eyes flashing, and pointed at the man with the ax. “Peter Peter kidnapped my maid and is holding her prisoner inside of a pumpkin shell, preparing to feed her to his pet monster!” She swiveled her finger toward the Jabberwock.

Cinder blinked. “Peter ... Peter? Isn’t that from a nursery rhyme?”

“Cath,” said the boy in black. “Think of the prophecy. Reasoning with Peter Peter might be our best chance of

escaping it.”

The girl gave a rough shake to her head, then snarled. “He’s evil, Jest. They’re both evil! And I won’t let them terrorize Hearts any longer!”

With that, the girl dove for the sword. She grasped its hilt in both hands and pivoted to face the Jabberwock. The beast reared back on its hind legs with another scream. Cath stepped forward, preparing to swing for the monster’s neck, when Peter Peter blocked her path. The sword and the ax clanged together. For a few seconds they were locked in a duel, but it wasn’t long before the man had overpowered her. He knocked the sword from Cath’s grip, then raised the ax overhead.

“Cath! No!”

A blur of black—and when the ax came down, it didn’t strike the girl—but Jest.

Cath screamed.

But another swing of the ax ... and her agony, too, was ended.

Cinder stared, her breaths ragged, her brain fogged with disbelief. The brutality, the unnecessary bloodshed.

“We need to get out of here.” A hand grabbed her wrist. She started and yanked her arm away, but the man in the top hat grabbed her again. His eyes were wild and haunted, sweat dripping down one side of his face. “We need to get to Chess, before the last bit of the prophecy—”

“You’re not going anywhere,” growled Peter Peter, stomping toward them. A twisted snarl was on his face, blood splattered across his clothes. The Jabberwock pawed at the ground behind him, drool dripping from its fangs.

“The wannabe queen was right,” he said. “My pet monster is hungry. You two should keep her satisfied for a week or two, at least.”

The man beside her cursed. “I knew I shouldn’t have come back.”

Cinder glowered and had just sought out the aura of bioelectricity surrounding Peter Peter, was just preparing to seize control of him with her Lunar gift—when the side of her head was struck by the handle of the ax. Pain burst through her skull, followed by blackness.

And Cinder and the Mad Hatter were never seen or heard from again.

The end.

Chapter 47

Unlike Thorne, Cinder *didn't* trust every odd little tag she came across, and she wasn't interested in drinking any mystery liquid, especially at this mad tea party.

With a smile that was as polite as she could manage, she set the bottle back onto the table and started to back away. "Thanks, but ... no thanks."

Thorne and Cress looked at her, baffled and a little disappointed.

"Are you leaving? So soon?" said Cress, gesturing at the marvelous spread of treats. "We're just getting started!"

"Maybe later," said Cinder. "Right now, I really have to find a way back to the palace."

Turning on her heel, she marched away as quickly as she could. It wasn't long before she heard the off-key singing of another space shanty behind her. Clearly, her company wasn't going to be missed all that much.

She headed in the direction she thought Iko had gone, dodging in and out of the trees, until she found a winding dirt road. As she walked, the sun sank behind the trees and a chill swept through the woods. The sky slowly darkened, and Cinder worried that she really was going to be late for her own wedding, but every time she brought up the clock on her interface, it was stuck at the same time. The exact minute Iko had appeared in the window and told Cinder to follow her.

She felt like she'd been walking for hours when she finally emerged from the forest. The road split into two directions, with a crooked sign posted in front of her.

One arrow pointed to the right and read, PETER PETER'S PUMPKIN PATCH. The road dipped down into a small valley, and from where she stood, she could see a massive iron gate. The spiked finials on top were each punctured through a grinning, glowing jack-o'-lantern. Threads of pumpkin guts and slimy seeds coated the fence. Beyond the gate, a muddy field was crisscrossed with a tangle of pumpkins and vines, some as small as her hand, and others nearly as big as a house.

The arrow pointing to the left read, MÄRCHENFELD, and over the hills she could just glimpse the thatched roofs and timber-framed homes of a small village.

Neither seemed familiar, and she wasn't at all confident that either direction would take her back to New Beijing Palace.

★ ★ ★

If Cinder should go to the Pumpkin Patch, go to [Chapter 16](#).

If Cinder should go to Märchenfeld, go to [Chapter 52](#).

Chapter 48

“Iko, wait!” Cinder shouted, trying to keep her eye on Iko’s bouncing white bunny ears as she wove in between the forest’s thick trees.

But it wasn’t long before she could no longer see Iko.

Cinder slowly came to a stop, turning in each direction. She was surrounded by woods. Gnarled trunks and fallen logs overgrown with fungi and moss.

She let out a frustrated groan. “Great,” she muttered. “*Now* where am I?”

With a sigh, she started picking her way through the ferns and undergrowth, her feet sinking into the soft forest floor. She tried to keep heading in the direction she thought Iko had gone, but the only sign of life she saw were birds squawking from the boughs and the occasional squirrel scurrying across her path.

Until the faint sound of voices made her pause.

Cinder held her breath, head cocked to the side, and amplified the audio input on her interface to hear better.

Yes—there was someone nearby, just on the other side of a hodgepodge fence made of brambles and lichen, a single arched entrance not too far from where she stood. There could even be multiple someones, she thought, though she couldn’t quite make out what they were saying.

She considered calling out, but in this spooky forest, she worried she would scare them off. Instead, keeping her steps

as quiet as she could, she headed in the direction of the voices.

Proceed to [Chapter 20](#).

Chapter 49

“Oh no,” muttered Quint, as he, Pru, and Ari watched Jude roll his D20 again. And again. And again.

It landed on twenty. Every. Time.

Just like it had this entire campaign.

“What is wrong with that die?” said Pru, snatching it out of the air when Jude tried to roll it again. “Is it weighted?”

They were in Ari’s basement, character sheets and player guidebooks scattered around them, the newest Sadashiv record having gone silent ages ago.

Pru tossed Jude’s die herself.

Six.

She threw it again.

Eleven.

Then two, nine, seventeen.

She curled her lip, exasperated that the magical die didn’t seem to work for her, then begrudgingly handed it back to her brother.

“I don’t know,” said Jude, shrugging. “I’m just lucky tonight, I guess.”

“It does seem like a mathematical marvel,” said Ari. “Nothing but twenties? Doesn’t seem statistically possible.”

“It’s fine,” said Quint, who had been ready to call it quits on this role-playing adventure long before Sadashiv had

wrapped up his crooning rendition of Frank Sinatra's "Luck Be a Lady." "Let's just fight this cyborg and move on."

Jude grimaced. "That's the thing. If we're following the guidebook and, uh, honoring all those twenties I just rolled"—he looked around the table apologetically—"then the cyborg just went a little berserk and ... sort of slaughtered you all."

Pru lifted an eyebrow. "*Slaughtered* us?"

"I mean, you were still kind of beat up from fighting those goblins, and ... yeah. You didn't really stand a chance. I wouldn't have put in such a strong NPC if I'd known." He half-heartedly tossed the die one last time.

It tumbled and clacked across the table.

Twenty.

"All right, then," said Pru, gathering up her papers. "Thanks for introducing us to your weekly obsession, Jude. I can see why you enjoy this game so much."

"It's usually a lot more fun than this, I swear," said Jude. "I think I might go get myself some new dice."

"If I were you," said Ari, getting up to change the record, "I'd go out and buy yourself a lottery ticket. See if your luck holds for something other than Dungeons and Dragons."

Jude laughed, but then the laugh faltered, and a curious look glinted in his eye. "You know? Maybe I will."

The end.

Chapter 50

She was taken to a large courthouse in the middle of the city, a building that was all brick with imposing statues of lions guarding the entry doors. The inside had marble floors and way too much oak paneling on the walls, but Cinder hardly had time to criticize before she was led down two flights of stairs to the basement and locked up in a small jail cell.

It was empty but for a small cot, a small toilet, and ...

“Is that a spinning wheel?” said Cinder, eyeing the ancient wooden contraption.

“Yeah,” said the boy that Magpie had called Adrian. “There’s this one superhero that can spin straw into gold, so he comes and uses this cell sometimes when no one is in here. Says it relaxes him.” He tapped his marker against the metal lock. “The council will want to know who you are, and what you were doing to those people. I don’t expect you’ll have long to wait.”

“Good,” said Cinder, facing him through the bars. “Because I sort of have plans today.”

He smiled, like he thought she was joking. “I’ll let them know.”

“You do that,” she snapped, not trying to hide her irritation.

As soon as he had walked away, she scanned her small prison with annoyance. “Superheroes? Please. Even Thorne is more heroic than this.”

Proceed to [Chapter 24](#).

Chapter 51

Cinder jumped, and landed on the monster's back with a shock that reverberated through her body. She grunted and was barely able to lock her knees around the Jabberwock's scaly back before it bucked her off.

There was little to hold on to, so as its great leathery wings beat at the air, Cinder gripped one of the protruding spines that ran the ridge of its back and flattened herself out, holding on as tight as she could.

The creature let out a shriek and Cinder didn't know if it was angry to have an uninvited rider, or if something else had infuriated it.

Below, the world passed by—a blur of forests and fields—while up ahead, appearing almost as small as a grain of sand now, she thought she could make out the fluttering shape of the raven. It had quite the head start, but they were gaining on it.

Then, without warning, the bird descended toward the earth.

Cinder squinted into the wind, which stung her eyes, trying to see where it had gone.

“There!” she yelled, pointing toward a patch of dark, bare land dotted with bright orange spots. Whether the beast heard her or its keen eyesight spotted the bird as well, it took a sharp turn that nearly sent Cinder tumbling from its back. She cried

out and barely managed to hold on while the beast dove after the raven.

Except, as Cinder stared, the bird transformed into a boy. A boy in a jester's black hat.

The orange spots, she saw as they came closer, were pumpkins set among a muddy field full of tangled and rotting vines. And the boy in the jester's hat wasn't alone. A girl in a mud-covered red-and-white gown stood staring at him with turbulent, frightened eyes.

“Jest! What are you doing here?” she screamed. “The drawings! The prophecy! You can't—”

Before she could finish, the monster landed in between her and the boy.

The girl screamed and stumbled back a step. “The Jabberwock! It's back!”

“I know,” said the boy—Jest, she had called him. “I'm sorry. But I couldn't let you do this on your own, not without telling you ... I love you, Cath. I want to marry you.”

The girl dragged her wide eyes from the monstrous Jabberwock. Cinder, too, stared down from her perch, jaw dropping, as the boy fell to one knee right there in the midst of that gloppy, filthy pumpkin patch, and held up a ruby ring.

“Hey!” Cinder yelled, startling the Jabberwock, which might have forgotten about her until that moment. Its muscles undulated beneath her, but Cinder held fast. “That's my ring!”

Her words had barely left her when a new figure appeared, stepping out from behind the biggest pumpkin Cinder had ever seen. He was a giant of a man, with frizzing red hair and an overhanging brow. And he was holding what appeared to be a very sharp ax.

“Jest!” the girl in red screamed. “Behind you!”

Glancing over his shoulder, Jest leaped to his feet just as the man gave a throaty cry and swung the ax. It would have taken the boy's head clean off had he not launched himself into a series of perfectly executed cartwheels, spinning out of the man's reach.

The jester's hat tumbled from his head, landing on top of a carved jack-o'-lantern.

The ax struck a huge pumpkin, getting lodged in its flesh.

Beneath Cinder, the Jabberwock reared back on its hind legs and let out a ferocious growl that thundered through Cinder's bones.

★ ★ ★

If Cinder should get off the Jabberwock before it throws her off, go to [Chapter 35](#).

If Cinder should try to control the Jabberwock, go to [Chapter 37](#).

Chapter 52

Cinder hadn't been walking long before she arrived in the small village. She could hear a river rushing by not far away, and the sweet smell of straw from the golden fields that stretched in every direction. But as she made her way toward the town center, a chill overtook her. Though dusk was casting long shadows across the road, there were no candles flickering in the windows that she passed. Though she could hear the occasional scuffle of chickens and goats behind the fences and gates, she saw no signs of people.

She paused at a water well, hands on her hips, and turned in a full circle, searching for signs of life.

"Hello?" she finally yelled. "Can anyone hear me? I could use some directions."

"Hush!" someone hissed.

It took Cinder a long moment to realize the word had come from behind the slats of a boarded-up window in one of the nearby cottages. Frowning, she crept closer. "Hello?" she said, quieter now.

"You need to hide!" whispered the voice. A child? "They'll be here soon! You should get off the road!"

Peering into the window's darkness, Cinder adjusted the sensor in her vision until she could make out the shape of a little girl with bouncing golden curls and a missing bottom tooth.

"Who's coming?" she asked.

“The Erlking and the wild hunt!” said the girl, her voice growing more panicked by the second. “Mama says if they catch you out of your bed after dark, the Erlking will kidnap you and feed your heart to his monsters.”

Cinder shuddered. “Doesn’t seem like a nice thing to threaten your kids with,” she muttered.

A woman’s frightened voice sounded from inside the cottage. “Gerdrut! Come away from the window! Quickly, now!”

“Wait,” said Cinder. “Could you tell me how to get to—”

“I’m sorry,” said the girl with an apologetic frown. “I have to go.” She disappeared, letting a heavy curtain fall over the interior of the window.

Cinder was about to knock at the front door and ask to speak to a parent when a distant noise—strangely familiar—gave her pause.

Howling. So low and haunting it reminded her of the Lunar attacks in Paris on the night she’d first met Scarlet and Wolf.

But there was something different about these cries. Something that left a cold wash of horror trailing down Cinder’s spine.

The noise was followed by the pounding of horses’ hooves, and the earth-rumbling bellow of a hunting horn.

Cinder stepped away from the house and peered down the road, toward a full moon that hung just above the horizon. After a moment of eerie stillness, she spied them. First—a cloud of mist and fog rolling over the hills. Then the pack of hounds leading the charge, bigger than any dogs she’d ever seen, with bristly black fur and fiery embers that burned behind their eye sockets and from within their jaws and even glowed through the thin patches of fur on their ribs. Behind the hellhounds came the hunters—men and women riding the most spectacular steeds. Cinder felt like she was standing in

the path of an approaching monsoon, but she couldn't make herself move. It was as if she'd been hypnotized, her jaw agape as the wild hunt thundered down the main road of the tiny town.

At first, it seemed they would storm past without giving her a single look, but at the last moment, the hunt came to a sudden halt.

A man rode at the front, dressed all in black leather, with a crossbow gripped in one hand. Though he was beautiful, the way he peered down at Cinder made her stomach tight with revulsion.

“Are you lost?” he said in a silken voice.

She hesitated, tempted to say no. She didn't want anything to do with these people. She wasn't entirely sure they really *were* people at all. Something seemed unearthly about them.

But the fact was, she *was* lost. And she needed to get back home.

With a painful swallow, she lifted her chin. “Sort of. Yes. You could say that.”

The man smirked and gestured at another horse, one that had no rider. “Then join us.”

A part of Cinder thought to refuse, but as she peered around at the ghouls staring down at her and the hounds with their smoldering eyes, she suspected she was not being given a choice.

With a shiver, she grabbed the horse's reins.

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Chapter 53

At first, Cinder could barely hold on to her steed as she tried desperately not to be flung from its back. But as the wild hunt passed through forests and mountains and fields shimmering silver beneath a full moon, she slowly eased up her tight grip. Soon, her heart was pounding, not with terror, but elation. Her eyes stung with the crisp wind. Her lungs burned with a hundred blissful aromas—wood smoke and wildflowers and a salty sea breeze.

It was everything.

Pure, unencumbered freedom.

No responsibilities.

No duties.

No court etiquette. No fancy hairstyles. No uncomfortable gowns or hours of droll political speeches or the constant pressure to be *princess-queen-cyborg-revolutionary-empress*—

All memories of her life before stirred up inside her until, one by one, they vanished, like stars winking out at the end of a long winter's night.

In their wake was a girl who only now knew what it truly was to be free.

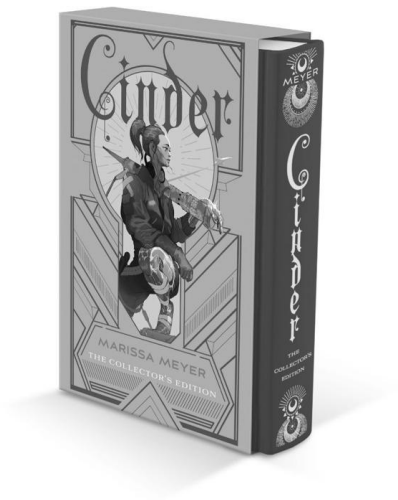
A girl who would never fully understand what it had cost her.

A girl who was never seen or heard from again.

The end.

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Marissa Meyer is the #1 *New York Times*–bestselling author of the Renegades Trilogy, The Lunar Chronicles series, the *Wires and Nerve* graphic novels, and The Lunar Chronicles Coloring Book. Her first standalone novel, *Heartless*, was also a #1 *New York Times* bestseller. Marissa created and hosts a podcast called The Happy Writer. She lives in Tacoma, Washington, with her husband and their two daughters. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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