

Being around so many other humans made Blake nervous.

Vale was a sight to behold and she found herself quickly falling in love with the shore, and the way the sun glittered across the endless expanse of water like a carpet of gemstones catching the light. The air felt heavier here but fresh, tinged with salt, and the sand between her toes as the gentle waves lapped at her legs was refreshing.

But everything else... the constant stares, the looks of disgust or *worse*, it made Blake's skin crawl. While some were indifferent, and looked at her as if she were no more interesting than a bug, the others leered at her with unkind thoughts, be they violent or... sexual in nature. They didn't bother hiding it because *why would they?* This was normal behavior for them, and they were expected to endure it because they were *nothing*.

And yet... she didn't regret coming with them. Not that she really had a choice in the matter, but... right here, right now, the sea breeze against her skin, the sun high above her head, the clean, salty air filling her lungs... it was nice.

If she ever had a chance to choose where she lived, she'd choose somewhere close by the sea. Somewhere where she could see a sight like this, every day. Somewhere where she could walk along the shoreline, bury her feet in the sand and just *exist*. Somewhere where... well, she could catch some fish if she wanted.

She *really* liked fish. So what? She didn't really know how to catch them, though, but she could always learn. How hard could it be?

Somewhere like Menagerie would be best.

These were wishful thoughts, and would never happen. Perhaps it was stupid to dream but she couldn't help it. Reality wasn't much fun, so why not let her imagination take her away on occasion?

Kicking her feet through the water, she made her way back onto the beach. Letting her dress fall, she held a hand above her brow and gazed out to sea, where the island of Patch was located. Looking through the binoculars had been fun. Being able to see distant lands...

"Hi~!" a cute little voice chirped, and Blake jumped, startled.

She hadn't heard anyone approach.

Blake looked around wildly but didn't spot anyone. It wasn't until she glanced down that she noticed a little girl, maybe five years old, maybe six. She was dressed in a one piece swimsuit, her long blonde hair tied up in a messy bun, her bright blue eyes blinking up at her innocently. Blake tensed, glancing around quickly but there weren't very many people at this part of the beach. A couple of joggers ran by, about fifty feet away, and didn't spare them a glance.

"Um," Blake wavered. "Hello?"

The little girl beamed happily.

Jaune and her mom were still seated on the rock, but they weren't paying attention to her, only each other. In fact, they were sitting close together, and even at this distance, Blake could see that they were holding hands as they spoke in low voices.

What were they *doing*?

“What’s your name?” the little girl asked, drawing Blake’s attention back to her current dilemma.

“I think you should go find your mother,” Blake said, making a small shooing motion with her hands.

The girl just blinked, her head tilting to the side. “Why?”

Blake grimaced. “B-Because she wouldn’t want you talking to strangers, that’s why.”

“If I knew your name, you wouldn’t be a stranger!”

This girl... who was teaching her things like that?

But it was clear she wasn’t going away. Blake tried creating a little distance, walking a few feet but the girl trotted after her happily, that same, blinding smile on her face.

“...Blake. My name is... Blake.”

The little girl hopped up and down excitedly.

“I’m Coral,” the girl said proudly, hands on hips.

“Um – hi, Coral,” Blake said awkwardly.

What was she doing? There was nothing stopping her from just walking away. Sure, the girl – Coral – might follow her, but she couldn’t control that. Jaune could deal with her, send her away or find her parents, whatever. Staying here, speaking to her was... ill advised.

Yet she didn’t move.

Why didn’t she move?

Those wide, blue eyes gazed at her without disgust, without fear, without anger, without anything but pure happiness, curiosity. Blake was reminded of a time, long ago, when other blonde haired, blue eyed girls looked at her in a similar way.

Jaune’s sisters.

But age had stolen from them that innocence, and had instead replaced it with hate. The hate of their mother, *that woman*. As each year passed, Blake traveled further and further from those wonderful times, where they played together, laughed together. Where they looked at her as if she were a person and not a *thing*.

Jaune didn’t look at her like a *thing*.

Jaune was trying his best.

He wanted to protect her.

Blake... liked that, but it also chafed her. She wasn't some pathetic creature that required him, yet she *was*. The laws of the land made sure of it. Those men that had looked at her and her mother earlier. If they'd touched them, slapped them around, and *more* – no one would have cared. No one would have stopped it. Only their position as Jaune's property would have protected them.

It made her feel sick.

This little girl, though – it felt nice to be looked at without anger or disgust, or even pity. To Coral, Blake was just another person.

Her feet remained firmly rooted to the ground.

"You have fluffy ears," Coral pointed out in a way only children could do.

"I do," Blake said softly.

"What are they?"

It didn't come from a place of revulsion. It was simply the curiosity of a child. Blake didn't take offence.

“They’re my faunus trait. They’re cat ears.”

Coral gasped, stars in her eyes. “I like cats!”

She really was a little cutie. On a whim, Blake began moving her ears, causing them to flick. Coral giggled and clapped her hands.

“I wish I had cat ears!”

*No, you don’t, Blake thought. And one day, you’ll understand why.*

Those kind blue eyes moved from her ears to her dress, and she said, “You’re dress in really pretty~!”

Blake’s lips twitched. “Thank you.”

“I have a dress like that, it’s my favorite, but mommy says I can’t wear it all the time or it’ll get dirty and ruined. I have to wear this when I want to swim,” Coral tugged at her swimsuit. It was a soft pink in color. “I like my dress better.”

Blake opened her mouth to say something encouraging or funny or *something* when a sharp voice cracked like a whip.

“Get away from my daughter!”

Blake flinched as she was shoved aside, almost falling. She managed to catch herself at the last moment, and when she looked up, she saw the hateful face of a blonde woman with eyes similar to Coral, features twisted in anger.

Coral made a sound of confusion as she was pulled away from her.

Nothing good could ever last. Not with her.

“Did she hurt you, darling?” the mother asked, checking Coral over frantically. As if Blake had bitten her like a rabid dog.

“I didn’t touch her, we were just talking.”

“Shut your mouth, you mutt,” the woman snarled, and Coral’s eyes widened in shock. “Who let you off your leash? Do I have to call the pound?”

Blake grit her teeth. “You’re scaring your—,” daughter, she tried to say, but the woman wasn’t having any of it.

“Help! Someone come get this animal!” she started shouting, and Blake backed off, looking around frantically. Thankfully Jaune and her mother arrived quickly, though anyone close enough to hear the confrontation was staring.

The mother took one look at Jaune and Kali, putting it all together.

“Is this your faunus?” she accused, pointing between them. “Why isn’t she on her leash? She could have harmed my daughter!”

“Mommy,” Coral tried to speak up but was shushed, shrinking away at the raised voices.

“Blake wouldn’t harm a child,” Jaune tried to deescalate but it was hopeless. That only seemed to rile her up even more.

“She approached my daughter without consent! I didn’t give her permission to be around my baby girl, who knows what she would have done if I didn’t catch her,” she ranted, completely unhinged. “We have laws for a reason, young man! They’re to protect good folk like us. Letting this beast off her leash is completely irresponsible!”

Animal. Beast. Mutt.

That’s all she was to these people. That’s all humans would ever see her as.

The mother continued to rave, face twisted. She looked completely mad, and the longer it went, the more upset Coral became, tears filling those baby blue eyes. She was such a sweet child, and yet when she grew up, how much of that sweetness would remain? One day, would she also view Blake like she was lower than dirt?

Inherited hatred.

Blake wanted to cry.

“Look, this is just a misunderstanding,” Jaune cut across her rant. “Can you stop yelling, please? Your daughter is getting upset.”

“She’s upset because your pet tried to ravage her!”

“What’s going on here?” a new voice called out, and when Blake turned to face the newcomer, her heart leapt into her throat.

There was nothing special about him, just an elderly gentleman – in his fifties, maybe a little older – but it wasn’t him that frightened her so. It was the large Mantlese Shepherd had had with him, its brown eyes locked onto her. For a moment, Blake couldn’t breathe, her body seizing in terror before she stumbled behind Jaune, using him as a shield.

“Blake?” he questioned softly.

“This young man is letting his faunus off their leashes, one of them tried to attack my little girl!”

The new man said something but it was drowned out by the sound of her heartbeat, pounding in her ears. She couldn’t take her eyes off the dog which continued to stare at her, as if it was moments away from pouncing. Blake felt like she was a young girl again, on the Arc farm, all those years ago.

It hadn’t been long after *that woman* had shown her true face, when Jaune’s innocent gift had turned all their lives upside down. She’d still been coming to terms with her new reality, beginning to understand the power dynamic that had always existed but she could no longer

ignore. Her mother had been showing her how to hang out the laundry before she'd been called away to attend to something, leaving her alone.

They claimed that the dogs had gotten out of their kennels themselves, but Blake always suspected that someone had let them out. A cynical thought but why wouldn't she think it? The result was the same regardless. The Arc's owned many dogs. Some were farm dogs, used to help round up cattle, sheep, and other livestock. The others were used for hunting, trained to bring down animals larger than themselves.

It was the hunting dogs that had gotten loose.

Blake hadn't even seen them coming. One moment she'd been hanging up the white sheet on the clothes line, and then the next, she'd been pinned to the ground as the dogs attempted to maul her. By some miracle, she hadn't been bitten, their teeth latching onto her dress and tearing the material as they shook their heads wildly, but Blake had been overwhelmed by fear. Screaming, she'd struggled and thrashed until she'd gotten loose, and then scaled the nearest tree. They'd surrounded the tree, snarling and barking, and she'd been trapped up there for an eternity until someone noticed.

In the end, it had been Jaune and his father that found her, and managed to round up the dogs and return them to their enclosure.

She'd never been a big fan of dogs before that, but ever since, she was absolutely terrified of them. *That woman* blamed her for 'provoking' the dogs and causing the whole thing, because of cause she did, but Aureolin Arc had pinned the blame on an old, rusted latch that finally gave out.

Her fingers grabbed the back of Jaune's shirt, bunching the material as she shook. Kali placed a hand on her shoulder, an attempt to calming her down but she barely felt it, beginning to hyperventilate.

She was having a panic attack.

Blake blinked rapidly as her vision began to swim out of focus. She felt unsteady on her feet, and then the next thing she knew, she was being carried. Without thinking, she curled against whoever it was that was carrying her, taking comfort in their broad, strong chest and the powerful arms that cradled her.

Pathetic. She felt truly pathetic.

It was Jaune who was carrying her because who else would it be? She nuzzled against him unconsciously, shivering, and lost all sense of time. Her heart was still pounding, her breathing coming in short pants, but she felt... better.

A little bit.

“Blake, are you okay?” he asked when they finally stopped.

He let her down, and Blake opened her eyes, looking around as she regained her balance. They’d retreated even further down the beach where even fewer people were. Jaune was staring at her worriedly, as was her mother, and it made her flush in embarrassment.

“What?” she asked, a tad more rudely than she would have liked.

“What happened?” he asked softly.

She looked away shamefully. “Nothing. It was just... the dog...”

Kali made a sound of understanding. “Oh – Blake, darling.”

“I’m fine,” she muttered. “I just... need a moment.”

“Are you thirsty?” Jaune asked.

“What?”

“I can get you a drink, if you’d like,” he looked between the both of them. “Kali, would you like something to drink?”

She nodded, grateful. “Yes, that would be wonderful. Blake?”

“I – sure,” she sighed, hugging herself. She wasn’t quite calm, not yet, but the shaking had stopped. The panic was receding. “That would be... nice.”

“Just wait here, I’ll be back quickly,” he said, looking around. “There aren’t really people here so we won’t... there won’t be anyone like that woman, hopefully...”

Jaune dashed off and Blake watched him go, heading towards the stores.

“Are you feeling okay?” her mother asked gently. “That woman...”

Blake grimaced. “I didn’t... I was just talking to that girl, that’s all.”

“I know,” Kali said. “I know. We know. She was being unreasonable.”

“They’re *all* unreasonable. All of them,” Blake replied bitterly. “This is such *bullshit*,” the anger was returning, thick and fast. “That little girl, all she wanted was to ask me about my – my *ears* and she thought my dress was pretty, and it turned into *all of that!*”

The fuck was wrong with everyone? Couldn’t they just leave them alone?

Jaune was only gone about five minutes before he returned with their drinks. The cups were comically large, clear plastic, and when he offered her one, Blake found out that they were ice cold. A closer look revealed that the liquid inside was mostly frozen. Not enough to be solid but more of a slush, and colored a bright blue.

“They said that one is called Bubblegum Blast,” Jaune shrugged. “It sounded nice.”

Blake took a cautious sip. It was sweet and as expected, cold. Really, really cold. It had a mildly fruity taste, though warped somehow. Artificial, most likely, a blend of various flavors – but it was good. Something a child would like... but she wasn’t offended by the choice, taking another sip.

The one he handed to her mom was bright red.

“Raspberry,” Kali revealed at her curious glance.

Jaune’s was brown.

“Cola,” he smiled. “Want to try it?”

He offered his drink but she shook her head, mindful that he’d just had his mouth on the straw. Just what the hell was he thinking? It was unsanitary and... and... you should share drinks like that.

“No thanks,” she muttered.

The drink helped a little bit. The adrenaline had faded, and Blake no longer felt the looming presence of her panic, but she couldn’t forget that little girl. With a mother like that, that sweetness wouldn’t last.

One day, she’d be just like the rest of them.

It made Blake sad.

They drank their beverages in silence, Kali handing over Blake’s sandals. She slipped them onto her feet and followed behind them as they left the beach, climbing to the stairs back onto the wooden boardwalk.

A small stage had been set up and a band was playing, the type of music Blake had occasionally heard from Sapphire and Saphron's rooms. The type of music that *that woman* hadn't approved of. Nearby, there were people dressed up in costumes handing out fliers. The costumes ranged from things like pirates to full animal suits, their large heads and bulging eyes equally attracting and scaring children by the dozens.

Jaune accepted one of the pamphlets and read it before showing them.

"Cat cafe?" Blake asked blankly. "What's that?"

Jaune shrugged. "I don't know. I think – I mean, it just looks like a normal cafe... but they have cats. Lots of cats."

"They had places like that in Mistral," Kali said quietly. "They were very popular. People can have a meal and read, and play with cats."

"I don't like it," Blake said grumpily.

Something about it rubbed her the wrong way. As if it were mocking her, somehow. Because she was a cat faunus. Blake imagined herself in a similar situation, forced to indulge all the touching of humans.

"It looks like they have a street car down here," Jaune said, peering over the heads of the crowd. It wasn't as busy here but there were still a lot of people. "I wonder where it goes..." he trailed off.

"Jaune?" Kali asked, concerned. "What's wrong?"

Blake watched as his face went ashen, as if he'd seen a ghost.

"I think maybe we should go home," he said suddenly. "I'm not – I think it'll be best if we leave."

He turned towards them suddenly and Blake saw the tension in his expression, and it made her own anxiety spike.

"What's happening?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"We're going home," he said. "Let's go."

A small part of her wanted to rebel, wanting to know what had him so spooked but her fear won out. Anything that could freak him out like this couldn't be good, not for them.

"Jaune?" Kali asked softly. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. I'm fine," he clearly wasn't. "Come on."

Blake craned her neck as he marched them away, trying to spot what had him so rattled. She saw the street car he'd mentioned, parked in the middle of the street letting off passengers, two of which caught her attention immediately.

One had snow white hair, almost glowing under the light of the sun, while the other, taller girl had tresses of pure crimson. Even at a distance, Blake saw that they were both exceedingly beautiful with figures to die for, the white haired girl slender and petite, while the crimson haired girl was tall and curvy.

Who were they?

Whoever they were, it seemed that they were famous somehow because people began gathering around them, taking out their scrolls to snap pictures or record videos. That wasn't normal behavior, not unless they were very well known, no matter how pretty they were.

And they were pretty. For some reason, this particular fact ticked her off.

They caught a taxi back to the town house. The entire way, Jaune's hands were tense, gripping his knees hard enough to make his knuckles stand out vividly. When they were back inside the safety of their home, some of the tension bled out of his body but Blake could still see it in the lines of his face.

"Who were they?" she asked bluntly. She couldn't help herself.

He looked at her in surprise.

"What?"

"Those girls," she said, and Blake knew she'd hit the nail on the head when panic flared in his eyes. "Who are they?"

“Girls?” Kali questioned. “What girls?”

“There aren’t any girls,” he lied.

“The one’s Jaune is running away from.”

“I’m not running away from them,” he snapped, voice sharp, all but confirming it outright. Blake flinched as he glared at her but when he saw her reaction, he immediately cooled off. “I’m not – they don’t,” he sighed in frustration. “They go to school with me. They go to Beacon.”

“That doesn’t explain why you ran away from them,” Blake pointed out.

“Blake,” her mother chided. “That’s enough.”

She felt... *annoyed*. Something about those girls and his reaction rubbed her the wrong way.

“If you were alone, would we have left?”

His silence was answer enough.

Blake laughed bitterly. “He’s ashamed to be seen with us.”

She was taking it out on him again. But this time, it was his fault.

“Are they your girlfriends or something?” she asked.

“No,” he said instantly, and strangely, Blake felt a little better to hear it. Why did she feel better?

“Jaune,” Kali said gently. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He sighed.

“Like I said – they go to Beacon with me,” his lips pursed, thinking it over. “They’re friends.”

Friends.

You didn’t run from friends.

That wasn’t entirely true, though, was it? Blake had been running from Jaune for years now, all because... she gritted her teeth.

“What are their names?” Kali asked, and when Jaune gave her mother an uncertain look, she smiled. “I want to know who Jaune’s friends are. Is that okay?”

Blake's mouth finally started working again.

"People were taking pictures of them," she said. "Are they well known or something?"

Jaune grimaced. "You could say that. You saw them?" Blake nodded. "The one with red hair – her name is Pyrrha Nikos. She's a famous athlete from Mistral – and the best fighter in our year," he then shook his head. "No, probably the whole school."

"The one that offered to train with you?" Kali asked.

Jaune nodded. "That's her."

So *that* was Pyrrha. Jaune hadn't mentioned that she was also stupidly attractive.

"And the other one? She had white hair."

Kali frowned. "White hair?"

Jaune suddenly looked embarrassed, looking away from them. Blake frowned. What the fuck was with that bashful look, all of a sudden?

"Her name is Weiss Schnee."

The name didn't mean anything to her but it meant something to her mother, Kali's expression becoming troubled.

"Schnee... as in Schnee Dust Company?"

He nodded. "Yeah..."

Blake was lost. The name was vaguely familiar, as if she'd heard it once or twice before, a very long time ago but she had no idea where or when, or why it was important. She felt like she should know, though, and it was another shortcoming of her own limited education. It made her feel stupid.

"She's the heiress to the company, and really, really smart. She's also a really good fighter – not as good as Pyrrha," he admitted, as if he didn't want to say anything bad about her but there was no denying it. "But still at the top of the class."

Blake didn't like her.

"You've got a stupid look on your face."

"What?" he asked, startled. "No I don't."

"A *really* stupid look," she said nastily. He'd denied that they were his girlfriends, but, "Don't tell me you have a crush on her."

"I don't," he said but it wasn't very convincing this time.

She was being mean again. Kali looked at her, disappointed and all her anger bled away, making her feel exhausted and horrible.

"I'm going to my room."

She stomped up the stairs.

It had been an emotional day. That's why she was in such a foul mood. All the staring, that awful woman yelling at her because her daughter dared speak to her, that dog and her resulting panic attack... that's all it was. She was stressed. That's all.

Weiss Schnee didn't mean anything to her. So what if Jaune had a crush on her? She didn't care! He could have a crush on whoever he liked. Apparently she was some rich girl, and Jaune's family was pretty rich as well, so they would be a perfect match! *That woman* would be happy if he managed to bag some beautiful, wealthy heiress.

Blake flopped down on her bed and punched her pillow angrily before sagging, feeling silly.

What the fuck was her problem?

There was a creak as her door opened slightly and Blake sighed, knowing that her mother had followed her.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay?” she apologized before Kali scolded her. “I’m just... not feeling well.”

The bed dipped as her mom sat down.

“He wasn’t hiding us because he is ashamed of us,” Kali said quietly. “Not in the way you think. It’s complicated.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? It’s complicated?” she spat. “Why do you always defend him?”

“I’m just saying – the reason Jaune made us leave, it wasn’t just for himself.”

Blake peered at her mother.

“What?”

“The Schnee Dust Company... are one of the largest owners of faunus labor on Remnant, Blake,” Kali said, voice serious. “Maybe the largest. They’re a mining company that extracts Dust from the ground, refine it and sell it to the world at large. You could make the claim that they are one of the most important companies in the entire world, and their wealth reflects it. Weiss Schnee is their heiress and will one day inherit it.”

“So?”

Kali sighed. "What do you think her opinions on faunus are?"

Blake felt dread wash over her.

"Mining is a dangerous profession... who do you think goes down into those mines, without pay, and is forced to toil away under ground to extract Dust, an extremely volatile element?" she didn't even have to ask. Not really. "The subjugation of faunus would have only made their business even more profitable. You don't have to pay slaves, after all."

Blake glared at her bed, unwilling to meet her mother's eyes.

"That horrible woman that yelled at you... it could have been even worse than that."

"...So why is he friends with a girl like that?" Blake asked, wretched.

"Like I said – things are complicated."

Everything was complicated. Blake hated it.

She hated being caught out by things like this. Not knowing who the Schnee's were... it made her feel stupid. Maybe it wasn't her fault, she'd never had the opportunity to go to school, and what tutoring she had received from her mother had only been about basic things. Subjects like Math that *that woman* thought important for her to know so she could better serve her son.

This wasn't any way to live.

Ignorance wasn't bliss. Not here.

"Mom..."

"What is it?"

"Do you think... you could teach me more... now that we're here?"

Kali blinked, taken aback. "What?"

"I want to learn more... about the world, and not feel so clueless... I know that... *she* wouldn't approve but she isn't here. It should be fine, right?"

Kali hesitated before nodding. "I don't think Jaune would mind."

If she had to be in this gilded cage, at least she could have *something* for herself.