

Kali hummed happily as she moved around the kitchen, feeling as at home as she had ever felt in a very long time. Without the looming presence of Amethyst lurking around every corner, a weight had been lifted. It was amazing what just some distance could provide, because in truth, nothing had really changed. She was still property, owned by the Arc family, but what was the popular saying? Out of sight, out of mind? With only Jaune and Blake, things almost felt normal in a way she hadn't experienced in – well, in a lifetime.

Of course, the truth was anything but – but Kali could dream, couldn't she? Here, in this ridiculous house, she could pretend that she was a single mother to two children, helping to raise them to be the best people they could be.

A nice, normal fantasy.

What was wrong with that? Reality wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Kali grabbed the carton of eggs and set it on the counter before opening the fridge, and pulling out a bottle of cream. Cracking open several eggs into a bowl, she whisked them with a fork before adding cream to thicken the mixture. When that was done, she began pre-heating a couple of pans. Adding a small knob of butter to one, she swirled it around as it melted before pouring some of the mixture into the pan. Seasoning it with salt and pepper, and adding a pinch of cheese, she turned the heat down before retrieving a pack of bacon, and adding several strips to the other pan.

Soon the house was filled with the mouth watering aroma of sizzling smoked bacon.

Flipping the basic omelet over, she began preparing plates. Setting out three, she grabbed a container from the fridge that held a small cucumber salad she had prepared the night before and portioned it evenly. When the first omelet was done, she scooped it from the pan onto one of the plates, added more butter, and poured another helping of the mixture into the pan. Salt, pepper, cheese. She repeated this another time, until three golden omelets rested on each plate, alongside the cucumber salad and two slices of crispy bacon each.

Perfect.

Already, she could hear signs of activity upstairs. Soon, Jaune appeared, freshly showered – and part of her, the part that had attended to his every need for years – worried that he might have expected her to be there to dry him off, but she shook the notion away.

“Good morning, Jaune.”

He smiled at her but it was tinged with *something*. “Good morning, Kali.”

He’d been like this for the last couple of days.

Even Blake had noticed it, the subtle shroud of depression that hung above his head like a rain cloud. Something must have happened at Beacon but what that was, Kali didn’t know. Something bad, no doubt.

So she had made it her mission to cheer him up. Breakfast was only the beginning.

She watched as he sat down, his eyes lighting up as he tasted his first bite. Humming in approval, he began devouring his breakfast like only a teenage boy could.

“Mm. This is good,” he said between mouthfuls, some good cheer returned to him. “As always.”

Kali felt pleased as she took her own seat. "I'm glad you're enjoying it."

"I always enjoy your cooking."

Blake arrived then, having overheard their exchange. She rolled her eyes but didn't say anything, silently taking a seat and starting on her own meal. She'd dressed cutely again, as she had been every day recently. The new clothes Jaune had purchased for her was doing wonders, being able to express herself, if only in this simple way.

Kali had a feeling that it had more to do than simply not wanting to wear the maid uniform.

She recalled their conversation the previous week, after she'd lashed out at Jaune. She'd been frank with her daughter, and it appeared that her words had gotten through to her, because she'd been much more level headed since then – but one thing she hadn't spoken about was – well, it had been *obvious* what her daughter had been doing before she'd unintentionally interrupted her.

The room had reeked of her musk.

Kali still remembered what it had been like for her, as a teenager going through puberty. For faunus, it could be particularly powerful. While Blake was older now, at the end of it, it still had its grip on you at seventeen. Maybe not as potently, but enough.

And Kali had a feeling she knew where those confused impulses were being fueled from.

It felt like yesterday that Jaune and Blake had been inseparable, joined at the hip. Blake's adoration for him had been clear, almost reverence – until *that* day. The day that had ruined

everything, that had destroyed the illusion. A budding love, cut short – greater than familial love, something more.

Or so she'd believed.

Maybe not.

She'd seen the way Blake would sometimes watch him. She was good at being discreet but Kali had the eyes of a mother, and the subtle glances, the staring, even back at the Arc home – there was a sense of longing, though no longer just for a friend.

It made sense. Jaune was a very handsome young man. He had strong features, beautiful eyes and a kindness that was very attractive to a woman. Especially to a woman in their position, where kindness was a rarity in the modern world. And that was all before she took into account the more base desires his trained, well-worked physique invoked.

He was fit – very, very fit. Muscular and strong, a body forged by hard work. The body of a fighter, it had a purpose. Not for vanity and ego, but to protect others, to slay Grimm, to run the largest farm in the northern region, all of those things and more.

Kali frowned, feeling her own body respond to her thoughts. A gentle blooming of heat. It had been a life time since she'd felt the loving caress of a man, since she'd had her needs fulfilled. Blake wasn't the only one that touched herself when things became too much to ignore.

It was a normal action to take. There was nothing unusual or abnormal about it. Men, women – they experienced it all the same, and the only way to relieve the tension was to have sex, or masturbate.

She shouldn't be harboring thoughts for him, though. It was... wrong. Yes, Jaune was handsome. Incredibly so. But she'd practically raised him. She shouldn't have such... desires, even in passing. No matter how lonely she felt. And she was. Lonely, that is. So very lonely.

Blake was free to have them. She was not.

She focused instead on her mission to cheer him up. She had some suggestions, and from the look of the weather outside already, it was going to be a fine day.

"Jaune," she said, and he looked her way. "Do you have any plans for today?"

He shook his head. "Not really. I was going to go for my morning run but that's it."

"Might I make a suggestion?"

"Sure," he said, and even Blake perked up, interested.

"It's such a nice day outside, so I was thinking that maybe we could enjoy what the city has to offer," she suggested. "There were some pamphlets that came in the mail the other day, advertising new stores down on the water front. I think the city has been renovating the area for tourists."

He smiled, eyes soft. "Would you like to go?"

“I thought you would enjoy it, more than myself,” she said. “You’ve been working hard since you started at Beacon. It is good to relax when you have the chance and enjoy your youth. There are cafes and an ice cream store, and areas where you can sit down to eat, right on the water’s edge.”

“That sounds like fun,” he said, nodding his head. “I suppose I shouldn’t just stay inside every weekend. There is an entire city out there...”

He was country born and raised. Kali knew that that city interested him, though it might also be a little intimidating. It was the same for Blake. Kali remembered the wide-eyed awe when they’d first arrived on the train. It was unlike anything she’d ever experienced before.

“...we’ll have to wear those collars, won’t we?” Blake asked, voice subdued.

Jaune’s expression fell a little.

Kali nodded. “We will. But that isn’t a problem.”

“Are you sure?” Jaune asked.

“I am. I know that you don’t wish for it, Jaune. You aren’t like that.”

Something crossed his expression – gratitude, maybe? – but it was gone, and his smile returned.

“Okay. We’ll do that, then.”

Blake looked like she wanted to say something but held her tongue. She wasn’t angry, or at least didn’t look that way – just... resigned. Kali didn’t like it but it was better than her lashing out recklessly at Jaune for something he couldn’t control.

After breakfast, Jaune went for his run. Kali did the dishes in the meantime and cleaned the kitchen before getting ready for their outing. Blake was wearing a pretty sundress, the material light, a soft violet that suited her. Kali had a similar dress, one that Jaune had purchased for her, though it was pure white, with only the barest hint of blue thread used on the thin straps and around the hem.

When Blake saw her, the surprise was evident.

She’d never seen Kali in anything other than the maid uniform provided by the Arc family and her nightwear.

“Mom...” she trailed off, eyes wide.

Kali smiled shyly. “How do I look?”

She gave a playful spin.

“Good,” Blake said, genuinely. “You look good, mom.”

When Jaune returned, he was stuck dumb by her appearance, staring at her in shock. Deep down, it pleased her to see the faint dusting of pink on his cheeks, and the way his wonderful eyes dipped down her body.

Kali had always been proud of her figure. She wasn't as blessed as other women. Even her daughter at her young age was already more busty. But Kali had always been slender and fit, and she still retained that perkiness from her youth, even now.

"Um – I need to shower," he said dumbly. Blake was staring at him, or rather the way his sweat soaked shirt clung to his chest. "I won't be long."

"Take your time. Do you need any assistance?"

"N-No, I'll be fine. Thank you, Kali."

When Jaune left to wash up, she grinned at her daughter.

Blake returned the look warily. "What?"

"Jaune is looking very handsome today, don't you think?"

A flash of panic shot through Blake's eyes before her face smoothed out.

"I don't know you mean."

A little teasing was in order, Kali felt.

“He’s been working and training so hard,” Kali mused aloud.

“So what?” Blake asked petulantly.

“I’m just saying that his worth ethic is an attractive quality, that’s all. Don’t you agree?”

Blake’s brow furrowed. “I guess?”

“That isn’t all that’s attractive about him,” Kali waited a beat. “Young men his age don’t typically have physiques like that, unless they are very disciplined.”

Her daughter scowled. “He needs to be to be a Huntsmen.”

“Yes, that’s right. A lot of women would be quite taken by his looks, that’s all I’m getting at.”

“Mom,” Blake said shortly. “I don’t care about that.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. It doesn’t matter, anyway. Even if I did...” she trailed off. “We’re nothing.”

It always came back to that. Kali sighed. It had only been some light hearted ribbing but now it had become serious, a reminder of their place.

“Jaune doesn’t think we are nothing.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

Kali didn’t push any further.

“Let me make sure he has everything he needs,” she said instead, ascending the stairs.

The sounds of the shower were clear, and without a thought, Kali opened the door after a quick knock. She spotted a towel ready for him but no clothes.

“Jaune,” she said.

“Kali,” he replied quickly. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I was just wondering if you require any assistance. Would you like me to pick our some clothes?”

“You don’t have to do that.”

Steam obscured Jaune’s figure through the glass but Kali could see enough of his outline. The build of a warrior, hard, firm muscles and broad shoulders, a narrow waist and hips, tall – young, but a man. She knew she shouldn’t stare but she couldn’t help it.

“I want to,” she said, giving her head a quick shake. “Do you trust me with this task?”

“Of course I do,” he said, as if her question was silly.

“Then I will return shortly.”

Kali quickly went to his room and started going through his clothes. The day was going to be a warm one, though not too hot, so with that in mind, she made her selection. She found a pale blue polo shirt made from light material, breathable but stylish, the twin crescent moons of Arc sewn on the breast. A pair of simple dark denim jeans, a nice contrast to the lighter color shirt. And a pair of pure white sneakers.

It was a simple outfit but Kali saw the potential. Jaune also had a wide collection of accessories, courtesy of his mother. She picked out a nice watch, the face a dark crystal blue with silver numbers and hands, the band made some chrome links with patterns inscribed on each one.

She returned to the bathroom and placed everything on the counter as the shower turned off. Grabbing his towel, she waited at attention as he went to step out before spotting her, freezing.

“Kali.”

She maintained eye contact, feeling her tummy squirm.

She offered the towel.

“Here – or would you like me to... assist?”

It was a job she had performed countless times over the years. Not so much *recently*, but this was something they’d shared many times before.

“Uh,” he looked away. “Sure.”

He stepped out of the shower and onto the fluffy mat, keeping his body facing away from her. Kali swallowed, now looking at the back of his head. Eyes darting down, she saw the map of muscles that made up the landscape of his back, defined and strong, and then lower.

Jaune had a really cute butt.

She hastily looked back up and began drying him, dragging the towel across his damp skin. Kali started at his shoulders, moving down his arms, and then down his back, around his waist and hips. Kneeling, she felt her cheeks flare as she dried the backs of his thighs and calves, and that *cute butt*.

Rising back to her feet, she cleared her throat. “You may turn.”

“T-That’s okay. I can handle the rest.”

He held back a hand, and Kali handed the towel over.

“Thank you, Kali.”

She nodded, though he couldn’t see. “I – yes, you are welcome, Jaune. I’ll be waiting with Blake.”

Jaune began drying his hair as she stepped out, her breathing a little stifled. It was just the moisture, she assured herself, though she waited by the top of the stairs for a minute to calm herself down before returning to her daughter.

“What took you so long?” Blake asked bluntly.

“I was picking out an outfit for him to wear.”

It was delivered smoothly, showing nothing of the way her heart was beating much faster than usual.

That had been a mistake.

Jaune was a man now, so perhaps her days of wiping him down were long past. Of course, if he ever asked her, she should not disobey – but maybe it was inappropriate now, to offer the service herself. She didn't want Jaune to think she was taking *advantage* to ogle him.

Because that isn't what she was doing. Not at all. She would hate for such a misunderstanding to occur to him.

When Jaune came down the stairs, Kali knew she'd picked right. The polo fit perfectly, hugging his broad chest and shoulders, and highlighted the shape of his torso. He'd done his best to tame his wild hair, combing it and styling it, but it still had that roguish look that suited him so well.

His expression wasn't a happy one, though, and the reason was clear. In his hand he held their collars.

"Sorry," he muttered but Kali shook her head, taking hers and slipping it on without hesitation.

"Don't be. It isn't your fault."

Blake pursed her lips but didn't act out, for which Kali was grateful. Taking the collar, she put it on.

In his other hand, he held the leashes but rolling them up, he put them in his pocket.

"Jaune?"

“We’ll only use them if we’re told we have to,” he said. “Let’s go.”

He called for a taxi and soon they were crossing the city, heading towards the water front. Kali ignored the looks the driver was shooting them in the mirror, the type of look that a beautiful woman knew well mixed with the conflict of knowing what they were. When they arrived, Jaune got out first and opened her door like a gentleman.

The sea was calm this day, minor ripples as small waves washed ashore the golden sands of the beach. People milled by the waters edge, children and adults alike, towels and umbrellas set up in the softer sands. Kali inhaled deeply, tasting the salty air. When was the last time she’d seen the coastline? Had felt the refreshing ocean breeze on her skin? Much too long. She’d grown up on the coast, on the southern tip of Anima. It felt like an old friend.

Blake had never seen the like before. Her eyes drank it all in eagerly, none of her angst present as she absorbed this new experience. It was both thrilling and sad, to see her excited for something so small. If things had been different, this would have been a normal sight for her.

A long, wide boardwalk had been built, starting at the roads edge and leading out a fair distance. The street looked brand new, as did the stores lining the other side, and Kali saw countless cafes and eateries, clothing stores, souvenir outlets with small pieces of Valean culture for sale, and more.

It was busy. Even in this early hour, many had come to see the new sights. Kali knew that in such a busy area, they were meant to wear their leashes, but she spotted other faunus that only wore their collars, walking beside their owners without one.

It appeared that this rule wasn’t enforced as harshly as others. When a police officer spotted them, their eyes only paused for a brief moment to assess them before moving on.

“What would you like to do first?” Jaune asked.

There were small observation points with coin operated mounted binoculars to view distant features. They started there, Blake eagerly peering through the lenses as Jaune slotted a coin into it. Across the water, Kali could make out a landmass but it was far enough that she couldn't see much detail. Just a whole lot of green.

"That's Patch," Jaune explained. "Uh – a couple of girls at Beacon live there. They have a Huntsman preparatory school and everything. Signal, I think."

"Are they friends?" Kali asked.

Jaune shrugged awkwardly. "Uh – not really? I mean, maybe – we haven't really hung out together yet but they're both really nice. They're sister's but they look nothing alike."

Kali had a look when Blake was done. With the binoculars, she could make out much more detail. She spotted what could only be the ferry terminal, and the beginnings of a town that were quickly swallowed up by the surrounding forest.

Someone clucked their tongue, as if in displeasure. Looking up, Kali spotted an older woman glaring at them in disapproval. Blake's ears flattened to her head, aware of the hostility.

"These aren't for the use of animals, young man," she chided Jaune who looked flustered.

They moved on before she could cause a scene, though her eyes followed them through the crowd, as if waiting for them to slip up.

“Bitch,” Blake muttered under her breath, outraged.

“Sorry,” Jaune said, eyes downturned.

Kali touched his hand, giving it a quick, firm squeeze before stepping away.

“It’s fine. Ignore her.”

But it was a sign of things to come.

Some of the stores allowed faunus, and some of them did not. The ones that didn’t had signs outside, and even posts to hitch their leashes to. That only made Blake more surly. Jaune skipped those stores entirely, not interested. The ones that did allow faunus inside, some of them had areas where they weren’t allowed to go. They had to stand in the corner and be good, or else.

Jaune skipped those as well.

It was very depressing.

“Would you like an ice cream?” Jaune asked, in an attempt at cheering them up.

There was a store that was advertising a hundred and one different flavors, and from the line, it was looking quite popular.

Blake's expression wavered between irritation and interest, finally nodding her head when he asked again.

"What flavor do you want?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I've never had ice cream before, remember?"

Jaune grimaced. "Right. Um – Kali, do you want one?"

She nodded. "Yes, please. I'll just have vanilla."

Jaune joined the line. They made sure to stay close, they didn't want to get accused of being runaways, but not close enough to make it look like they were also in the queue.

Blake shifted uncomfortably, hugging herself, and Kali saw why. A group of young men were leering her way, nudging each other and pointing. Kali tensed, praying with everything she had that they wouldn't approach them. That was something they did not need.

But it looked like their prayers were going to go unanswered. She saw their resolve firm, and they began moving in their direction only to be stopped at the last moment by a group of girls. The girls took one look at them, knowing instinctively what they were about to do and began laying into them.

"Don't tell me you were going to seriously approach those fucking mutts?" she overheard one of the girls snap, voice filled with disgust. "I didn't think you were an animal lover. Why the fuck are

we even out here with you then if that's your lane? Urgh. Why are all the guys we hang out with such freaks?"

"Listen, we were just going to have a little fun, it isn't serious," one of the guys replied, and then they were having a full blown argument in the street.

It got bad enough that the police officers had to step in to ensure it didn't become violent.

"What's going on?" Jaune asked when he returned with their ice creams.

Blake scowled. "Bunch of jerks getting what they deserve."

They left the area quickly and headed towards the beach, taking the stairs down off the boardwalk onto the sands. Blake licked at her ice cream cone hesitantly before perking up, making a sound of delight.

"Like it?" Jaune asked happily.

Blake nodded. "It's really good!"

It wasn't anything special, just chocolate flavored ice cream but she tore into it, licking it enthusiastically. Jaune seemed very pleased and licked at his own; banana chocolate swirl.

They found a spot to sit, some smooth, old rocks protruding from the sand a little further down the beach, away from where people were swimming.

Their outing had been a bit of a mixed bag so far, but that was to be expected. But here, now, it was nice. Gazing out across the water, licking at their delicious treats, it was almost possible to forget. It was almost possible to believe that things were normal.

Almost.

When Blake finished her treat, she kicked off her sandals and stood.

“I’m going down to the water,” she said, in a better mood than before.

They watched as she walked down the waters edge, dipping her toes into the sea. A sudden breeze kicked up her hair, her dress flowing out behind her as she walked along the shoreline.

“Did something happen before?” Jaune asked quietly.

“Those people arguing, those men... they were looking our way. Those girls didn’t take too kindly to it,” Kali saw his troubled expression. “It could have been a lot worse.”

He sighed, shaking his head. “This is all so...” he hung his head. “It doesn’t matter where we go, it’ll be like this, won’t it?”

Kali nodded. “Yes.”

“Why can’t the world just be...” his frustration was clear in his tone, and in his eyes.

“Jaune,” when he looked her way, she asked, “Are you okay?”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

Kali searched for the words. “You’ve been... a little down, this week. Not like yourself. So I thought that maybe something had happened. Something that had upset you.”

“Oh,” he appeared surprised. “Um, I guess something happened... it’s just school, you know? I love Beacon, I think it’s amazing and being a Huntsman is all I’ve ever wanted to do, you know that. I want to help people and protect them,” Jaune turned his head to look at Blake when he said this, and Kali understood. “And what better way to do it as a Huntsman? They protect the kingdoms from Grimm, and they’re strong and capable. No one wants to mess with a Huntsman if they can help it.”

When he didn’t continue, she pressed, “But?”

“I just... I thought... I don’t know,” he sagged, his eyes growing distant as he scuffed his shoe through the sand. “I know Huntsmen help catch criminals or stop them, and I know... that faunus who run away at considered criminals, but I never thought I’d...”

Kali placed a hand on his shoulder before pulling it away, looking around, mindful of where they were. She needed to be careful.

“Never thought what?”

So he told her. About the class he'd had, where he had to track and chase down an 'escaped' faunus girl. How he'd tried to get her to stop and come back peacefully when he found her, but she wouldn't listen to him, no matter what he said, no matter how hard he tried. He told her about the things this girl said to him, the vitriol, the rage, and the fear on her face when he'd been forced to apprehend her physically.

Kali listened, hearing the very real conflict in his voice. It made her feel sick, knowing that he was put in this position but also knowing that this was the way of things now.

"Everyone else just sees it as normal," he confessed. "All my classmates... they had no problem completing their task. A few of them even took joy in beating them up. I just... don't get it. Am I the one who is wrong? Am I weird?"

"You aren't weird, Jaune," Kali said sadly but emphatically. "You aren't. Never believe that."

"Why wouldn't she listen, though?" he asked, shaking his head. "Didn't she understand that I didn't want to hurt her?"

Kali pursed her lips. "Jaune... if you were in her position, would you have listened?"

He looked at her with those wide, blue eyes of his.

"What?"

“If you were... *property*, owned by other people, and you were given a very real chance to escape... what would you do?”

He blinked, and thought about it, his brow furrowing in concentration.

“But the Grimm in the forest... she wouldn’t have got far.”

“Even so,” Kali said softly. “If you were a *thing*, and people treated you like less than dirt, and you had a chance, no matter how small, to get away, would you do it? Even if you might die in the process?”

After a moment, he nodded.

“That was her chance,” Kali thought about her own decision, so many years ago now. Stay in Mistral, sign away her freedom, the freedom of her daughter – or brave the wilds in a desperate attempt at making it somewhere safe, her infant daughter in tow. She’d once thought that if she’d been alone, she would have taken the gamble and she still believed that, to this day. She could bet her own life on it, but not Blake’s. “Her chance at... freedom. Even as small as it was. And she’d have probably hated herself if she didn’t take that chance and try her best, even if it as futile. I know I would have regretted it, if I didn’t.”

Jaune stared down at his hands.

“Do you... want to leave?” he asked. “Run away?”

Kali felt her heart stop.

For a brief, yet infinite second, Kali thought that she'd made a mistake, that she'd revealed too much of herself. If Amethyst had heard her say such a thing, if another human had heard he say such things, they may have taken it the wrong way. She'd have been punished.

But then she remembered it was *Jaune*.

She could trust Jaune.

She could.

Did she want to leave? Once upon a time, that would have been an easy question. It should still be an easy one, and yet... it wasn't. It was complicated.

"Have you ever thought of just... going?" his voice was distant. "Taking Blake and just... running."

"Have I ever thought of it? Yes," she admitted, and when he looked at her, she smiled sadly. "Of course I have. But would I?" She shook her head. "No. We'd be hunted down and... faunus that are caught, good things aren't waiting for them. I would never risk Blake's safety like that."

"But if there *was* a way, and it was safe... you'd go? And leave..." he trailed off.

Leave me.

That was what he was going to say. She could see it in the sudden embarrassment in his features, as he caught himself. The way he leaned away from her, as if to protect himself. He was flustered, and Kali... she was the same, hot around the collar even though she wasn't wearing anything with a collar to begin with.

"I don't know," she said, surprised. Because she was being completely honest. "I – Jaune..."

He nodded

"It's okay. It should be obvious, right?" he smiled awkwardly. "I think I understand better now."

Kali swallowed. "Stopping that girl, Jaune – there was nothing you could have done differently. If you'd let her go, they might suspect you. I know you're a good boy – no, a good man. You've always been sweet, and you still are. You haven't changed."

"Really?"

Kali nodded, meeting his eyes. "Really. I mean it."

They sat in silence as Blake continued to walk along the water's edge, holding her dress up so she could submerge her legs almost to her knees. The silence was a little bit awkward at first, but then Kali felt his hand on hers.

"Thanks," he said. "For... looking out for me. You always do. I feel a little better."

“Truly?”

He nodded. “I still feel horrible about it, but... having you have my back, it helps.”

“I’ll always have your back,” she said, turning her hand over and giving his a squeeze.

She would protect his goodness, if she were able. From everyone. His mother. The world. Even from Blake, when she could.

He didn’t pull his hand away, and Kali... enjoyed it. The contact, the intimacy... it felt good.

Too good.