

It was a day like any other and perhaps that made it all the worse.

Hamersley was a small village with a population above five hundred but no greater than a thousand, nestled in a lush valley surrounded by forest and farm land. While small, the fertile soil made this area an important strategic region for Vale who purchased most of the produce, meat and dairy products produced in the area. The only reason it wasn't more populated was because of its distance from the central power, but Vale made sure it was well protected.

The Huntsmen that lived in the area, for example. They were mostly retired and were given generous retirement packages to see out the rest of their days in this idyllic, peaceful place, ensuring that it always had protectors on hand should the Grimm or bandits come calling. Alongside the local militia formed of non-Aura users, and the frequent visits from teams from Beacon Academy sent out on class assignments, it meant that while tiny, they were well prepared for any such incidents.

The town was also connected to Vale by train, the last stop on a long line that stretched north from the city and passed through the mountains. Trains arrived once a week, bringing with them all manner of goods from the city in exchange for the food they grew. Because of this, once a week, it became a bit of an event to gather in the town for the market that sprung up to coincide with the arrival of the train.

So it was a usual day. What was unusual was that Kali and Blake were permitted to join the Arc family for the first time ever. Maybe that should have been a red flag, that fate had grown restless with the calm Kali's life had settled into, that she was too content, even *happy* despite being owned like a piece of property and it was time to shake things up a bit.

More than likely, it was just the result of a series of events none of them could have foreseen that made Jaune Arc the boy he was, and while it caused much suffering, Kali wouldn't change him for the world.

Amethyst led the way down the main avenue, her flock of daughters following in her wake. Stalls had been erected, lining the street on both sides. There were stalls selling everything from

clothing and plants, toys, art work in the form of carvings and sculptures, even makeshift jewelry. Some were selling animals; chickens, ducks, Kali even spied a pair of goats tethered to a post. One stall was selling fruits from their orchid; apples both green and red, fat oranges, pears, plums, peaches and more. Many more were selling vegetables; bright red tomatoes, bags of onions, heads of broccoli and cauliflower, potatoes by the bagful and great big pumpkins. Further on, the local butcher had set out chilled trays of meat; pork, beef, chicken, venison in the form of chops, steak, sausages, anything you could think of.

Then there was the food.

The air was filled with the scent of eggs and bacon, cuts of spiced beef, freshly baked bread, burgers and fries. Kali watched as Blake's head whipped back and forth, her eyes wide. A pang of sadness assaulted her, for who could blame her daughter who had never seen such sights before? Her entire life had been spent on the Arc family farm with the exception of the first months of her life, long before she could form memories. For Blake, this must have seemed like another world.

For Kali, it felt much the same and she had experienced much more life.

How long had it been since she had seen such cheer in the streets? Such lust for life? Long before the war, when she was but a child herself, growing up in southern Anima. Mistral had been a den of despair, not one she liked to think about.

She felt almost overwhelmed, and it could only be even more potent for her daughter.

Why they'd been invited on this outing, she hadn't a clue. They were usually left at the house to complete the chores. Blake was old enough now to take on some of the duties around the house, and Kali had been showing her the ropes. For now, it was nothing more than simple cleaning and folding laundry but as she grew older, her workload would increase.

Blake was at an age now that she was beginning to understand that there was something different about them and the rest of the Arcs, beyond just the obvious physical traits. Kali could see it. Blake was a smart girl.

For now, it was just accepted – but Kali knew that one day, she would come to resent that difference.

Beside Blake, Jaune walked without a care. He was watching her expression closely, smiling widely as her daughter took in the sights with awe. Perhaps the reason for their inclusion had to do with Jaune. She would have to ask after.

“They have a place that sells fish,” Jaune spoke, and suddenly, he was Blake’s entire world as her golden eyes swung around to stare at him.

“Really?” she asked, voice too excited. Kali saw Amethyst briefly glance back their way and felt trepidation, but then she looked away, continuing to lead them down the street and she could breathe easier.

“Yeah, they sell fresh fish they’ve just caught but they also cook it, as well,” Jaune explained, knowing just how much Blake loved fish. It was her favorite food – that, and cake, but cake was something she’d had just the once, and only because it had been set aside for them by mistake. “They rub all these spices on it and grill it over coals, oh, oh – and they also put it in batter and deep fry it. It’s really good!”

Blake was practically drooling at his description, and hastily wiped at her chin.

They were garnering some looks because of course they were. Hamersley was a human settlement untouched physically by the war, but many sons had gone off to fight. Kali could see which families had fought in the war by the way they looked at her, a sharper cut to their disdain. Kali stepped a little forward to shield Blake, hoping she wouldn’t notice but she need not have

bothered. She was so enraptured by whatever it was that Jaune was saying that even if a Grimm strolled down the street and started talking, she wouldn't even notice.

Not all the people looked at them as if they were scum. Many just looked at them indifferently, the same as any other pet, not an equal but inoffensive. Once upon a time, that might have infuriated her, caused her temper to flare but she'd much rather that than the dangerous, angry eyes of someone that may attempt to take actions into their own hands.

Many of them might have tried. They weren't the only faunus in Hamersley, Kali knew. A few of the other farms had faunus workers. Over the years, she'd overheard talk of altercations.

But the Arcs were different.

They might as well be royalty here for how they were treated. And while Kali and Blake may just be property, they were property that belonged to the Arcs. They might look at them with angry eyes, may wish death upon them, but they would never dare harm that which belonged to the Arc family.

"Girls," Amethyst suddenly said, and they all came to a stop. Turning, the Arc matriarch started handing out money. Sapphire and Saphron tried to act like it was no big deal, that they were too mature for all of this, but even they couldn't hide the excited gleam in their eyes as they received their allowance for the day. The younger children didn't even try to hide it, bouncing up and down as their mother distributed funds.

"Jaune," she then said, waving him forward. Jaune hurried up to his mother, beaming as she passed him some lien. His sisters chose this moment to pick on him a little, their hands ruffling his hair as he passed. No matter how much he squirmed, he couldn't escape seven pairs of hands.

“Cut it out,” he demanded, voice strong – or that’s what he probably thought. It came out as more of a squeak, and that only egged his sisters on even more, cooing as they embraced him in a full frontal assault on his psyche.

“Aren’t you just the cutest,” Saphron cooed as she rubbed her cheek against his. Sapphire laughed as she did the same on the other side, squishing him between them. The twins tickled his sides, causing him to buck wildly while Amber kissed him on the forehead several times, peppering him with small smooches. Iris and Ivory hung back, simply giggling loudly, drawing attention to the spectacle.

Jaune was well and truly embarrassed.

“Girls,” Amethyst sighed, shaking her head. An amused smile tugged at her pink lips. “Please let your brother go.”

He almost fell when they released him, his face scarlet, his ears burning a bright red. He tried to straighten his clothes but he looked a sight with his formally neatly combed hair in disarray. A glance at Blake showed Kali an expression filled with envy, though she did her best to hide it with Amethyst so close by.

She had never grown out of her subconscious fear of the woman.

“Go on, then,” Amethyst said, and the girls scattered in groups. Sapphire with Ivory, Saphron with Iris, Amber accompanying the twins. Even if the Arcs were seen as untouchable here, she would never send out her daughters alone.

Then it was just Jaune.

Amethyst started fussing with his hair, combing through it with her fingers. Jaune tried to make a show of not enjoying it but Kali watched the way he leaned into her hand, relishing the loving contact from his mother. It was in moments like these that Kali almost forgot, Amethyst's expression soft.

"Is dad coming?" Jaune asked.

"Soon," Amethyst promised. "One of the water troughs was leaking, so he is patching it up."

Blue eyes then settled on Kali, and her spine straightened, hands neatly folding across her stomach.

"You've my son to thank for this outing," she said, eyes moving over to Blake. Blake tried not to shrink. "He thought it would do well for you to see our community. I agreed."

Kali bowed and after a moment, Blake followed her mother's example.

"Thank you, Young Master," she said. "That is very kind of you."

Jaune's face twisted as it always did whenever she called him that. He'd told her before that he preferred it when she used his name but she only did in his private company. In front of strangers, or in front of his parents, she used this instead. It was the same with all of the children.

"And you, girl?" Amethyst asked lightly.

“Uh – thank you,” Blake said quickly, wavering before saying, “Young Master.”

Jaune frowned. “Mooom!”

“Yes, dear?” Amethyst went back to looking at her son, Blake sagging as she was no longer the center of attention. Kali subtly touched her back in support.

“Can I go to the fish stand?” he asked.

“You can,” she replied. “I’ve got some small business to take care of, so you’ll be accompanied by Kali. Be good, and stay with her, okay?”

“I will,” Jaune promised, nodding.

“Good,” Amethyst then said, “Kali, you won’t let him out of your sight.”

It wasn’t a question. It was a statement of fact. An order.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Sapphire will be close by,” she continued. “She knows to keep an eye on him.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

Amethyst hummed. “I won’t be long.”

After quickly kissing Jaune on the cheek, she left, leaving the three of them alone.

“Come on,” Jaune chirped, grabbing Blake’s hand. “Let’s go get some fish.”

Kali felt a dozen eyes and more zero in on them, focused on the way Jaune held Blake’s hand as he pulled her along. Tensing, she followed behind them closely, aware that Jaune’s simple act of affection was not received well by the surrounding people. But no one said anything, only observing them as they moved a little further down the street until the scent of spiced, grilled fish met their nose.

Blake made a sound of delight, and Kali herself felt her mouth water as the delicious scent curled around them. They’d not had breakfast yet, and like Blake, Kali adored fish – any seafood, in fact. Growing up on the southern coast of Anima, seafood had been a large staple of their diet. Their village had been small, even poor – but they’d eaten like kings, well supplied from the ocean. Scallops, oysters, mussels, clams, and countless species of fish.

This stall didn’t quite have that variety of food. There were two types of fish on display for purchase; blue cod and pink snapper. There were no oysters or mussels, but there were scallops. Aureolin had mentioned once upon a time that scallops often washed up on the beach to the north when the swells became rough, and the northern winds blew down in blistering storm. Kali supposed these were from the patch of harsh weather they’d endured this past week.

The man operating the stall was busy turning skewered fish on the charcoal grill, and when he looked up, his eyes widened in surprise, darting up to her cat ears. His expression turned to stone.

Kali expected the worst and when his mouth opened, she braced for it.

“Those smell really good~!” Jaune said loudly, interrupting whatever was about to be said. The man looked down and caught sight of Jaune, and Kali witnessed recognition pass over his face. He knew who Jaune was.

He also spotted Jaune’s hand nestled in Blake’s.

“Young Mister Arc,” he greeted, voice harsh but not through anger; a smoker’s voice, raspy.  
“What can I do for ya today?”

“Can I have three of those, please?” Jaune pointed at the fish skewers.

Kali knew that the man wished to decline. Though he kept his eyes trained on the youngest Arc, expression open, she could see the tension in his shoulders, his stance. Other people were listening in, curious, nosy.

“Three,” the man repeated, as if he hadn’t heard Jaune correctly.

Jaune nodded happily. “Yup~! How much are they?”

He began fiddling with the money his mother had given him.

“Seven lien,” the man finally said. Jaune carefully counted out the correct amount and set it down on the counter. The man collected the lien and stashed it away before filling Jaune’s order. Money was money, and the reputation of the Arcs was beyond dispute here. He wasn’t about to make a scene, even though he knew his fish would soon be warming the bellies of two faunus.

“Thanks,” Jaune chirped, accepting the skewers with a handful of napkins. He quickly handed one over to Blake who looked completely smitten, stars in her eyes as she handled it with care. Kali accepted her skewer calmly, though she felt anything but calm.

“Should we eat here?” Jaune asked.

“How about we walk around a bit, Young Master?” Kali quickly intercepted, knowing they’d far overstayed their welcome.

“Okay,” he said. “Come on, there are heaps of places to see.”

And again, he grabbed Blake’s free hand and pulled her along. It was such a sweet sight and once upon a time, it would have filled Kali with warmth. Now it only filled her with tension, feeling those glares follow them around.

A human and a faunus, walking hand in hand. That was the type of world they’d been fighting for, once upon a time. They just wanted to be seen as equals, as worthy of respect as any other. Kali knew that is how Jaune saw them. To him, Blake and Kali were practically family. He never voiced it and she was glad of it, because that would not be taken well, but the sentiment was there, clear as day.

He made no distinction between Blake and his sisters. Even if he knew logically that Blake wasn’t his blood, and that their situation was different, it didn’t change that.

At home, behind closed doors – that was fine. Outside within human society? It was very different.

“This is so *good*,” Blake said giddily as she tore into her fish, devouring half of it in an instant. Kali nibbled on her own and found that her daughter wasn’t lying; it was delicious. The flesh was soft and flaky, white and fresh. The mild spices only helped to bring out the natural taste of the fish rather than overshadow and dominate it, and the hot juices were filled with such wonderful flavor.

Jaune looked very pleased with himself, puffing his chest out.

Kali kept a close watch on the pair of them as they moved around the market. After they finished their fish, Jaune showed them a stall selling old antique books, knowing how much Blake loved to read. The old woman at the counter peered at them curiously. Kali was surprised to find that her expression was different; there was no disgust or anger, nor was there indifference. If anything, she appeared sad.

“Do you like to read?” she asked Blake.

Blake nodded quickly.

“She’s really good at it,” Jaune piped up. “She can read way faster than I can.”

The elderly woman smiled. “Is that so? Do any of these books look interesting to you?”

Many of the books were quite large with old leather covers, the spines creased with age and use. As Blake and Jaune searched for something, Kali inspected a few of them herself. There were history books about the Great War, about the formation of the current kingdoms, theories about Dust, and even Grimm, as they were understood some number of decades in the past. There were books filled with old poems, religious texts from ages past from religions that no longer existed any longer, biology texts, entire play scripts, and a dusty old compendium of fairy tales.

It was that last one that Kali picked up unconsciously, flicking through the pages. It contained stories such as The Warrior in the Woods, The Indecisive King, The Gift of the Moon, The Girl in the Tower, and many more.

Even faunus tales were present; The Shallow Sea and The Judgement of Faunus.

Those two in particular left a sour taste in her mouth considering the current state of her people.

And of course, there was The Girl Who Fell Through the World. That story was Jaune and Blake's favorite, and one that she had read to the pair of them often when they were younger. Aureolin had a copy of it in his study, and they had read it themselves over dozens of times since being allowed inside.

"My husband often said that fairy tales held kernels of truth within," the elderly owner of the stall suddenly said, causing her to jump. "It was just a matter of divining them."

Kali quickly set the book down. "I apologize, ma'am. I should have asked."

"Nonsense," she waved a wrinkled hand, gifting her with a toothless smile. "These books are here to be read. You've done nothing wrong."

“Can I get this one?” Jaune asked, holding up a big book. It was an atlas, a collection of maps detailing many of Remnant’s landmasses. Outdated to be sure, for it was penned before the Great War according to the date, and yet they didn’t seem to care.

“Certainly,” the old woman took the book and placed it in a paper bag. “That’ll be one lien.”

Jaune blinked. “Woah, that’s really cheap!”

She clearly wasn’t selling them to make money.

“These all used to belong to my husband,” she explained. “Without him, they just sit around collecting dust. He would rather them out in the world with fresh eyes than laying forgotten in the dark.”

She included the compendium of fairy tales for another lien, Jaune quickly jumping on it. Now he had his very own copy of his favorite tale and wouldn’t have to rely on his father’s copy. And it had many more tales beside that.

As they moved away, they were intercepted by Sapphire and Ivory. The latter was licking a frozen treat.

“What’d you get?” she asked her younger brother, peering into the paper bag. Her nose scrunched up. “That smells moldy.”

Jaune poked out his tongue. “It’s a map book and fairy tales.”

“Wow, you really are a dork, aren’t you?”

“Shut up, Saph.”

She snickered, jabbing him in the side just to annoy him. “Dad just got here.”

Jaune perked up, looking around. “Where is he?”

“He went to find mom first,” Sapphire rolled her eyes as if this was particularly annoying. She was a huge daddy’s girl and hated it when even her mother took precedence over her. “We were gonna go check out the weapons stall. You want to become a Huntsman, don’t you?”

That was a sure fire way to catch his attention. Mention his dream and anything to do with it, and he was snagged, hook, line and sinker. What once had been a spur of the moment boast had turned into a real passion. Kali knew that Amethyst and Aureolin both had issue with his sudden interest; he was the only son, and there was an expectation that one day, he would take on the duties of running the family business. The farm, the animals, they would all be Jaune’s one day.

Being a Huntsman was a dangerous profession.

They would need some convincing to let their son pursue his dream.

His sisters were all for it, though. Especially Sapphire and Saphron. They thought it would be super cool to have a Huntsman in the family, and encouraged him every chance they got. Blake

was similar; her view of Huntsmen was fueled by the stories told about them in books. To her, Jaune filled that heroic vision.

Kali wondered if she would still have that same mindset if she knew that many Huntsmen fought in the Faunus Rights Revolution. They fought on both sides, of course – but there was a possibility that Ghira's life had been taken by one such warrior. There was a popular saying back then among the troops; that one Huntsman equaled a hundred ordinary soldiers.

She banished those morbid thoughts from her mind. There was no point in dwelling on such things.

Despite all that, Kali thought that Jaune Arc would make a fine Huntsman. He was kind and gentle, his heart was pure, his desire to help others was true and not motivated by greed. He was everything a Huntsman was meant to be, someone that stood steadfast in the face of darkness and did not retreat, who offered a hand to those in need of it.

But he'd have a lot of work to do. He was already seven and hadn't undergone any training. Many others started as young as six, preparing to join preparatory combat schools that would lead into the major academies. His parents would need to make a decision soon.

Sapphire led the way, Ivory falling into step with Jaune and Blake. It didn't take them long to arrive at the stall she spoke of, larger than the rest with a long wood counter upon which several different weapons had been set out, as well as a handful of tables with everything from swords, daggers, axes and spears. There were firearms of all sizes; pistols that could easily be carried and concealed, rifles for larger targets, single shot, semi-automatic and fully automatic. There were shotguns, compound bows, and armor; mail chain link undershirts, Dust steel breastplates, greaves, pauldrons, gauntlets, everything you could ever need.

Some of these were for hunting animals. Some were for Grimm. It was easy to tell which was which, not from the size or anything like that but because the ones suited for Grimm were capable of using Dust ammunition.

The owner of the stall was an older man with a long, graying beard, chewing on a slender piece of straw. His eyes found Sapphire first, but quickly found Kali and Blake, his brow furrowing. Hostile eyes peered at them, and Kali knew in that moment that this man would have little issue with picking up one of these weapons and using it on them under the right circumstances.

Kali tensed and placed a hand on Blake's shoulder, halting her advance. Blake looked up at her in surprise but didn't try to break free, understanding something was wrong from the way her fingers squeezed her.

"...and what can I do for ya," the man turned back to face Sapphire, Jaune and Ivory, momentarily struck dumb as he stared at them, as if finally recognizing them. That was confirmed a second later as he asked, "...you lot are Aureolin's brats, ain't ya?"

"Yep," Sapphire said, popping the P. "My brother wants to be a Huntsman one day, so we wanted to check out your stuff."

Jaune nodded happily. "These look really cool, mister."

Ivory just continued to lick her frozen treat.

"A Huntsman needs a weapon, tha's for sure," the man nodded. "Feel free ta look aroun' some."

"Thanks," Jaune beamed.

He appeared genuinely enthusiastic as he moved around the stall, checking out all the different weapons on offer but Kali saw none of the reverence and awe he bestowed upon the sword hanging above the Arcs mantle piece. Crocea Mors had been the apple of his eye even before he declared his intent to be a Huntsman, and Kali felt that if he wished for any weapon to carry into his career, it would be that one.

She wasn't sure how long they spent there but the longer it was, the more hostile glares she and her daughter received from the owner. Jaune was just toying with a slender dagger when they heard the roaring sound of a train approaching, his attention pulled away.

Amethyst and Aureolin found them then, and they both appeared in good spirits.

"Come along," Amethyst called. She had already wrangled the rest of her daughters. "The train is here."

As it pulled in and grinded to a halt, they all heard the breaks lock into place with deafening snaps. Workers disembarked and began unloading goods onto the platform, while others attended to the train itself, removing large cylinders of formerly yellow Dust that were now depleted, and replacing them with new ones.

A young man jogged over to them, a handful of papers clutched in hand. "Mr. Arc," he greeted, bowing quickly. "Here is the paperwork."

The Arc patriarch glanced through them. From what Kali could see, they were a list of items; equipment for the farm.

"They've all been checked off?" he asked.

The young man nodded. "Yes, sir. I saw to it personally."

"Good, good. The smaller items can be loaded into the back of my truck. The new tractor can be left on the platform, someone will be by later to drive it back."

"Of course, sir."

Aureolin gave him instructions and directions, and then the man set off.

"Mooooom," Cerise moaned suddenly, looking antsy. "Can we check out all the new stuff? Pleasepleaseplease?"

Lavender backed her twin up, "Come oooooon, can we?"

"You've got an hour," she said. "Wait until everything is off the platform."

It felt like every person in town was here to collect their orders. Kali made sure to keep close to Jaune, grabbing Blake's hand so they wouldn't be separated. He appeared oddly excited about something.

That something turned out to be a package. It wasn't large, and it appeared light, wrapped in brown paper and tied up with twine. His name was clearly printed on the front but nothing else.

"What's that?" Blake asked curiously.

Jaune tucked it under his arm, grinning. "It's a secret."

If only she'd done something then. But there was no way of knowing.

Once everyone had taken their fill, they made their way back to the Arc home. Aureolin drove back in his truck, Sapphire and Iris joining them while the rest walked back. With every step they took, Kali could see Jaune's giddiness grow. Whatever was in that package, it had him super excited.

He was first through the door, and he was running up the stairs moments after kicking off his shoes.

"What's that dork up to now?" Saphron asked aloud, shaking her head. Amethyst seemed amused.

Blake followed Jaune up the stairs though much slower.

"Kali," Amethyst waved for her to follow, and so she did. They entered the kitchen.

"Are you thirsty?" Amethyst asked.

She was. "I am, ma'am."

“Do you like orange juice?”

Kali nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

It always made her nervous when Amethyst was overly nice, a reminder of their very first encounter. She watched the blonde woman grab a cold pitcher of juice from the fridge and pour two glasses, offering one to her. Kali sipped at it, relishing the ice cold freshness of it.

“How did you find the town?”

There was always a reason behind everything she did. Kali knew this.

“It was nice, ma’am.”

Amethyst hummed. “Nice. Yes, I suppose it is. And the people?”

Kali wasn’t sure how to answer that.

Amethyst saw the struggle play out and smiled, laughing lightly. “You may be honest, Kali. Tell me; how did you find them?”

Kali kept her eyes trained on her orange juice. “They did not wish us there, ma’am.”

Not all of them. There was the elderly lady at the book store but she was in the minority. Most of them found Kali and Blake's presence distasteful at best.

"No," Amethyst said. "They didn't, did they?"

Amethyst drank from her glass, her pink lips caressing the rim. "But they tolerated you, didn't they?"

Kali nodded. "They did, ma'am."

"Hamersley is but a small town. Important in certain ways but in the grand scheme of things, of little note. The people here are simple folk. Our family brings a lot of trade to this region, and so they pay us appropriate deference. That is why no matter how much it may disgust them, they will not touch you."

Kali remained silent.

"It will not be so, elsewhere. But you know this," Amethyst sighed. "You know that all too well. But your daughter does not. She will need to learn, do you understand? I fear it will break her little soul if she learns too late."

Kali's hands tightened around her glass. "Yes, ma'am."

"That is why I agreed to my son's proposal. You will accompany us to town from now on. The collars will remain off, for the time being. That is something we can afford you, out here in the country. In the city, it would not be acceptable."

Kali nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Amethyst smiled. "I'm glad you understand. You've always been very understanding of things."

Suddenly, there was a commotion from upstairs, a series of giggles that floated down the stairs. It appeared that the other girls had joined them. Amethyst glanced at the ceiling, delighted.

"Shall we see what is so funny?" Amethyst suggested.

Kali wished more than anything that she hadn't.

The children were all gathered in Jaune's room and the giggling only grew louder as they ascended the stairs. His door was open.

"They're so soft," they overheard Iris gush. "Blake, are your ears this soft?"

Kali felt a bolt of dread rush through her.

Amethyst made it to the door first, and she froze in the doorway, as if in shock. Kali arrived a second later, peering around her to see what was happening.

Jaune was surrounded by his sisters, something settled atop his head. It took Kali a few seconds to realize what they were; cat ears. A thin plastic headband held them in place, threaded through his hair and holding them steady, fashioned from yellow material to match his golden blond hair. He wasn't the only one, either. Iris, Ivory, Cerise and Lavender were all wearing a pair, while the older girls were inspecting their own, as if nervous.

*"What are you doing?"*

It felt like the air was sucked out of the room, Amethyst's voice cracking like a whip. Everyone jumped, even Kali.

She couldn't ever remember Amethyst raising her voice in anger.

It cut through the cheer of the children, and several pairs of blue eyes stared at their mother, wide-eyed. Blake shrunk instantly, her ears pinned back in terror as Amethyst stormed into the room.

"Mom?" Lavender asked.

A hand lashed out, snatching the cat ears from Jaune's head. He made a sound of pain as his hair was pulled, a soft cry as Amethyst seized the offending item and tossed it across the room.

*"Where did you get those? Remove those things **now!**"*

They flinched, hastily obeying their mother.

Kali heard someone thundering up the stairs.

“Amethyst?” Aureolin called, racing down the hallway. “What’s wrong? Why are you yelling?”

Kali moved aside so he could enter, feeling light headed. Aureolin paused in the doorway, watching as his daughters removed the cat ears they were wearing, his brow furrowing.

“What is going on?” he asked sternly.

Amethyst grabbed Jaune by the arm before pinning Blake with wrathful eyes. “*You* – with me, *now!*”

She then hauled Jaune out of the room and towards the study, but not before glaring at Kali. “And you! Now!”

Blake was too terrified to walk, shaking on the spot so Kali quickly grabbed her and ushered her down the hallway. Her breathing came out in uneven gasps, her heart thudding loudly in her ears.

This was everything she’d ever feared. That thinly veiled politeness was gone, and a woman filled with rage was left in its place.

“Mom, what – ow~!” Jaune hissed. “You’re hurting me!”

The door to the study slammed open and she pulled Jaune inside. Aureolin followed them in, and then Kali directed Blake. She could feel Blake's shoulders trembling beneath her palms.

"Close the door," Aureolin said, and his voice was devoid of emotion. Kali obeyed quickly, spotting Saphron and Sapphire peering around the door jam of Jaune's room before it shut completely.

"Mom?" Jaune asked, scared. "W-Why are you angry?"

Amethyst's face was no longer soft and inviting as was usual, instead harsh in its sharpness. Jaune stepped back as stormy blue eyes focused on him.

"You are *not* to wear those things again, ever. Do I make myself clear?"

"W-What? But Mom, what's wrong with—"

She cut him off, almost screaming, "You aren't a *faunus*!"

The way she said faunus was as if it were a curse word, filled with venom. Kali felt like she'd been slapped.

"You're human," she continued, voice still risen in anger. "You aren't an animal so *do not pretend to be one!*"

"Amethyst," Aureolin tried, placing a hand on her shoulder but she shrugged him off.

“Don’t you try and calm me down,” she spat.

Jaune just looked confused, looking between his parents. “What’s wrong with faunus?”

“Disgusting, filthy, *untrustworthy* – I should have known, what were we *thinking*?”

Kali stared.

The expression on Amethyst’s face was completely unhinged, her calm demeanor, her graceful poise obliterated by her rage. This is what had been hiding beneath the surface all this time, controlled by her impeccable image.

No longer.

“We’ve been too lenient, Aureolin. We should have been harsher!”

“Dad?” Jaune asked, becoming upset. “W-What did I do wrong?”

Aureolin sighed heavily. “Jaune – promise me you will never do something like that again.”

“What?”

“Promise me, Jaune,” he said sternly.

“I – I promise,” it was clear that he still didn’t understand.

“Jaune, sweetie,” and suddenly, it was like a switch flicked. Amethyst knelt level with her son, motherly, warm. “Faunus are nothing more than slaves, do you understand?”

Jaune blinked.

“S-Slaves?”

She nodded encouragingly. “That’s right. Kali is our property. That *girl*,” she waved her hand towards Blake, making her flinch. “She is also our property. Your property. They aren’t people.”

Jaune frowned. “But aren’t they... like family?”

Kali felt her heart stop.

Amethyst’s face twitched.

“They aren’t family, Jaune,” Aureolin said in place of his wife, Amethyst was so irate. “They are indebted to us, and will serve us for the rest of their lives. This was their decision. Faunus are conditioned to seek a firm hand.”

Kali could see the idea clashing with what Jaune knew, his entire world view. A part of him knew that Kali and Blake worked for their family, but he also knew that they lived in their house, ate their food, and watched over them unlike the other workers. It was more intimate, and they’d been here his entire life.

Blake was his friend. Kali was like an aunt.

“You aren’t to play with her any more,” Amethyst finally said. “You are not to speak to her unless it is to give her an order, do you understand?”

“Mom...”

“Do you *understand*?”

Jaune swallowed. “I – I understand.”

“Now go to your sisters,” she stood, dismissing him. “We will talk to you later. This isn’t over.”

Jaune hesitated, looking at Blake and then at her. Kali felt her heart break, knowing that things would never be the same again. When he left, the tension in the room only increased.

"Kali," Amethyst said. Kali felt the hair on her neck rise. "On your knees."

Slowly, she got down on your knees and bowed, completely submissive. It was humiliating but it was nothing compared to signing away her life in the first place, and she knew that if she didn't obey every order to the letter right now, it would only place Blake in danger.

"*Girl*," she continued, a scared sound escaping Blake's lips. "On your knees."

Blake dropped down, an excuse given for her shaking legs to give out.

"You will keep your daughter away from my children unless she is performing her set tasks, do I make myself clear?"

Kali pressed her forehead into the floor. "Yes, ma'am."

"If she does not, I'll stuff that little bitch like a chew toy," Blake whimpered, cowering at the threat. "Do you understand?"

Kali's voice wavered. "Yes, ma'am."

"She will work on the farm until I am satisfied. Afterwards, you will continue her training until she can fulfil all of the duties you handle effortlessly."

"Yes, ma'am."

“She is nothing more than a tool for my son to wield. When her usefulness is no longer more profitable than keeping her around, he will discard her and get a new one.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“...if anything like this happens again...”

It wasn't a threat. It was a promise.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now get out of my sight and take that girl with you, I don't want to see you for the rest of the day. There will be no dinner tonight.”