

The Arc family home was a white, two story farmhouse with a wide porch that spanned the entire front side of the house and around the sides. It was set to the backdrop of rolling green fields, a glittering freshwater lake, a pine forest to the east and mountainous peaks to the south, capped with snow all year around. Sheep and cattle grazed the fields while orchards were tended to by workers from the nearby town of Hamersley, and the property of five hundred hectares was fenced and secured with sensors should the Grimm decide to make their presence known.

Kali remembered her early days here, filled with fear and doubt, unable to appreciate the natural beauty on display all around her. Meeting Aureolin Arc, Amethyst's husband, had been an experience fraught with nerves. With Amethyst's warning still clear in her mind, she'd been unable to meet his eyes, bowing so low that her forehead threatened to touch the polished hardwood floors of their kitchen.

But in the five years she had worked here, she had been treated well. She was clothed and fed, and while wrangling eight – *nine* – children under the age of ten was exhausting work, it was work she loved. Dealing with children was something she delighted in, and now that the threat of starvation no longer weighed her down, she had the energy to cope.

Sapphire was the oldest of the Arc girls, followed by Saphron, Amber, the twins Lavender and Cerise, Iris and lastly, Ivory. They were all sweet in their own ways but some of the older ones were beginning to discover what being a faunus actually meant in this world, and their attitudes were changing. Where once they looked at her as if she were another member of their family, there was a hesitance there now, as if they were unsure of her true motives. As if she had some type of ulterior reasoning for being there.

It broke her heart to see it but there was nothing to be done.

The youngest was Amethyst and Aureolin's only son; Jaune. He was of an age with Blake, and the two had practically grown up side-by-side. Kali always worried that the Arc's might take exception to how close they were, and yet that didn't appear to be the case. They did everything together.

“If your daughter is to serve my son well, she needs to know everything about him,” Amethyst said one day when Kali’s worry had been too much to hide. “Jaune is our pride and joy, our only son. Why do you think I paid so much for her?”

Blake was to be Jaune’s personal servant, was the implication. She would serve Jaune and Jaune alone, rather than the entire Arc family as a whole. That was still some years away yet but it explained why they were so lenient with their play together.

Working for the Arc’s was... good. As good as not having any personal freedom could be. While she was always reminded of her place, Kali knew that things could always be worse than they were. She wasn’t being abused, she wasn’t being sexually exploited – so long as she did her job and did her job well, she was treated as any other member of staff, no different to the chef that cooked their meals, and no different to the workers who helped Aureolin on the farm.

She even had her very own uniform. It was nothing special, a traditional maids uniform; a black dress with a white apron, white stockings and gloves.

She wanted to keep it that way. If she had to live out the rest of her life in captivity, the least she could ensure was that it was a comfortable stay, no matter how sour the thought tasted in her mouth.

She was becoming domesticated like a house cat. Once upon a time, the thought would have rankled her, inflamed her anger – but now, it was no more than a spark, quickly snuffed out. A remnant of a past life, almost.

This was her life now.

She didn’t completely hate it.

That was just the truth of it.

Though when she thought about it, the wedding band on her ring finger always felt heavier.

Perhaps her favorite of the Arc's was little Jaune. He was such a sweetheart and he always treated Blake well. He looked at her with the same eyes Amethyst boasted, such clear, sky blue – but these eyes were innocent, warm, loving. They held none of the command that Amethyst wielded effortlessly though not unfairly, though no matter how fair she was, Kali always remained on guard around her.

With Jaune, she could just be herself. A mother tending to her young.

It was time to wake him up.

Breakfast was being served and the little tyke was still abed. It was her duty to ensure that he was roused, washed and dressed, and so that is what she was doing now. Knocking sharply on the door, she waited. When no sounds issued from within, she opened the door.

Jaune was sleeping peacefully, his blonde hair tousled and his blanket thrown haphazardly from his body. A gentle breeze shifted the curtain and Kali padded across the carpeted floor silently, shutting the window before throwing the curtains wide. Sunlight poured in, the harsh shafts of light passing across his face. Kali watched as his face scrunched cutely before he rolled away, groaning.

She couldn't have that.

“Jaune,” she cooed, tickling his ear. “Time to get up.”

He squirmed away from her finger but she simply followed, tickling it more vigorously before moving lower to his neck. Jaune squealed as he flipped around, blue eyes blinking blearily before he attempted to glare at her.

It only made him look cuter.

“Breakfast will be ready shortly,” she said promptly.

He groaned, rubbing at his eyes before pouting, “I want to sleep.”

His stomach chose that moment to gurgle, and his rounded cheeks flushed scarlet as she tittered.

“It seems your body wants food more,” she said knowingly. “Come on, up you get. You need to shower first.”

You’d think he was a cat with how he loathed washing of any kind, be it showering or bathing. It was almost like he was allergic to water. None of the other children had been so difficult but perhaps it was a boy thing.

He was dressed in a light blue bunny rabbit onesie that she quickly stripped off him before gathering a set of clean clothes from his set of drawers. Marching him across the hallway to the bathroom, she turned the shower on and tested the water, running her hand under the spray until it was hot but not scalding.

"In you get," she said and with reluctance, he obeyed.

From there, Kali grabbed the sponge and lathered it up before reaching in and giving him a vigorous wipe down, putting in the extra work for the places he was liable to miss if he was left to his own devices.

"Head back, please," she said, and when he tilted his head back like she asked, she lathered his wet hair with no tears shampoo, massaging it in firmly before rinsing it out and applying conditioner. When he was completely scrubbed head to toe, she gave his entire body one last pass over with the shower head before turning it off.

"Out you get," Jaune stepped out of the shower onto the mat where she proceeded to attack him with a towel. He giggled as she vigorously dried him off, completely engulfed in the fluffy white towel.

She then dressed him in a pair of black pants and a white button down shirt before directing him in front of the mirror. Kali carefully combed his hair, parting it on the left and combing it across to the right, ensuring that it was neat and tidy before applying a few minor bursts of hair spray.

"There," she said, smiling at him in the mirror. "Now you look very handsome."

He beamed back at her.

The breakfast table was set when they arrived, the Arc girls already seated. Amethyst smiled as she saw Jaune and patted the chair beside her which he quickly jumped onto. Aureolin was already out on the farm and in the distance, Kali could pick up the sound of cattle being directed to the milking sheds, her ears flicking atop her head.

“Thank you, Kali,” Amethyst said. The dismissal was clear and so Kali bowed her head before slinking from the room, but not before grabbing the two plates set aside for herself and Blake.

They were fed well – but they weren’t permitted to sit at the table with the rest of them.

Blake was still sleeping when she returned to their shared room. It was small but well furnished, and while it was suited more for one person than two, Blake was still young and slept in the same bed with her. Placing the tray on top of the nearby dresser, she simply observed her daughter for a moment.

As much as it pained her that Blake was in this situation, she was healthy and whole. She couldn’t remember a time where she didn’t live here with the Arcs, this had been her entire life. Blake didn’t know anything else.

She was alive. That was all that mattered to Kali.

Padding over, he tickled her ears much like she’d done to Jaune. Blake squirmed, amber eyes blinking open blearily.

“Mom?” she whispered, voice rough with sleep. “Wha...?”

“Breakfast is here,” she said, smiling. “Up you get.”

Blake rubbed at her eyes awkwardly as Kali fetched the tray and set it down on the bed before sitting down. Bacon, eggs and toast – she watched Blake's expression change, expression eager as she reached for her fork and knife.

She all but inhaled the food on her plate.

When she was done, Kali made sure to wash and dress her, much like she'd done for Jaune. All of the clothes Blake owned were old cast-offs from the older Arc girls, so they were of high quality. Kali picked out a cute white dress and a pair of matching sandals.

"Can I go play?" Blake asked, already impatient. "Jaune said he wants to check out the big tree down near the lake today."

"Does he now?" Kali grinned. "Not without an escort, he won't be."

"You can come, can't you?" Blake pleaded as only a near six year old could.

"After I finish my work, perhaps," Kali gave her a stern look. "You aren't to go alone, do I make myself clear?"

"I won't be alone," Blake protested before wilting under Kali's firm gaze. "I'll... be with Jaune."

"You'll both wait until I'm done," Kali said. "Or Mrs. Arc will be very unhappy."

Talk of upsetting Mrs. Arc did the trick. While Amethyst treated Blake as politely as she treated Kali, Blake always said that Amethyst was scary. Perhaps it was the intuition of a child, seeing that which was hidden behind easy smiles and false eyes, but it meant that Blake was always on her very best behavior around Jaune's mother.

Something that Kali was eternally grateful for.

Kali returned their dishes to the kitchen, and Jaune was waiting for them in the living room.

"Blake!" Jaune shouted, and Blake quickly ran to join him. "We can go down to the tree now."

"Mom said we have to wait until she's done with her work," Blake pouted. "We can't go alone."

"Aww man, really?" Jaune moaned, distraught.

"So you'll be a good boy and stay inside the house, won't you?" Kali pressed and Jaune nodded, dejected.

"Alriiight. Come on, we can read in the library."

Blake's face lit up. She was a little bookworm and while as a faunus, she would never attend school and gain an education, Amethyst made sure that she could at least read and would allow Kali to teach her numbers. If she couldn't at least do this much, she couldn't serve Jaune sufficiently.

A small blessing.

Kali watched the pair run off towards the 'library'. They called it a library but it was just Aureolin's office, the walls framed with bookshelves and straining underneath the knowledge they contained. The first time Kali had caught them in there, she'd been horrified but luckily, the Arc patriarch hadn't even bat an eye. In fact, he'd been happy that his son was showing an interest in his books, so much so that he didn't care that Blake had been with him.

Since that first time, they'd been given permission to read in there and so that was a popular spot they inhabited when they weren't outside.

Now that the two youngest were preoccupied, Kali made sure everyone else was well tended to. Most of the girls had returned to their rooms while Sapphire and Saphron were outside, Kali spotting their long blonde hair from the kitchen window. The dishes were stacked next to the sink and so she got to work, washing and drying them until they sparkled before placing them in their correct spots. After the dishes were done, she wiped down all the counters, cleaned the stove and swept and mopped the floor.

She was so used to this now that it only took half an hour, something that once took her much longer. She then moved into the dining room, wiping down the table and vacuuming the carpet. She moved from there to the lounge, and then the entryway, the hall and the stairs. Her last job was the bathroom, wiping down the mirror and sink, mopping the tiled floor and ensuring that the shower was spotless, the glass crystal clear.

She then tracked down Jaune and Blake, catching them huddled over a book, reading.

"Mom?" Blake noticed her first, perking up. "Can we go now?"

She nodded and Jaune whooped, jumping to his feet and almost dropping the book they'd been reading.

“Careful,” Kali warned. “You wouldn’t want to damage your fathers books, would you?”

Jaune quickly shook his head, closing the book gently and returning it to its place on one of the many bookshelves.

“Come on, then,” Kali ushered them downstairs and out the front door.

The garden was lush with vibrant flowers at this time of year, everything from red roses to violet tulips, and Blake stopped to smell them as she did almost every day when they were in bloom. The path led straight down to the lake where in times past, a bench had been placed by the waters edge. The large tree Jaune and Blake were interested in was further around, and so Kali kept close as the children played ahead of her. Ducks, swans and other birds swam across the still waters, and the sound of frogs croaking could be heard.

This region was teeming with life.

The war never touched this area of Remnant and it showed. Grimm attacks around Mistral and to the south were still exceedingly common, the creatures of darkness still roused by the conflict that was now half a decade past. While Grimm still inhabited this area, their numbers were controllable, their actions more in line with regular Grimm attacks rather than the frenzied, swarming movements of those in areas still steeped in so much negativity.

The nearby town of Hamersley was home to a number of Huntsmen, and while Aureolin wasn’t a Huntsman, he was a trained warrior who was part of the local militia in his younger years. Any Grimm that encroached on his property or the town itself was swiftly dealt with.

Sometimes Kali felt like she was in a different world. One of beauty and no hardship. These fanciful thoughts were brief because she was surely reminded of the truth in short order.

The tree the children were so interested in was an old willow with gnarled branches, the smooth trunk twisted and overhanging the edge of the lake with some of its long, narrow leaves kissing the water's surface. It had a broad, spreading canopy that shielded the ground from the sun.

"Stay away from the water," she said. "And no climbing."

They acted like they didn't hear her but she saw Blake's ears twitch, so she knew at least one of them heard her warnings. Jaune ran over to the trunk and placed his cheek against the smooth bark before crouching in the softened soil. Blake leaned over his shoulder to see what he was doing before shrieking, running away as he stood up with a bug resting on the back of his hand.

"Put that down!" Blake shouted.

"It doesn't bite if you don't hurt it," Jaune promised, though that didn't exactly calm Blake down. The bug he had found was quite large, metallic green with golden grooves; a type of beetle with large mandibles that could very much bite. He was extremely careful with it, though. It walked across his palm which he kept straight, non threatening. "See? Isn't it awesome?"

Blake's expression told them exactly what she thought of that beetle.

She wasn't a fan of bugs. What she was a fan of were fish.

Around the leaves that dipped into the water, small fish were swimming, hoping to catch small bugs that touched upon the surface of the lake. Though the reason why Blake was a fan of fish was because she liked to eat them, not because she wanted to play with them.

“Jaune,” Blake whined. “Put it down.”

“Don’t you think it’s awesome?” Jaune held it up for Kali to see better.

She smiled. “It’s very beautiful.”

“Mooooom,” Blake stomped her foot. “It’s a bug!”

Jaune carefully placed it back on the ground before grabbing Blake’s hand, pulling her along.

“Come on,” he said.

Kali let them have their fun, simply watching them play but with the eyes of a hawk. It was relaxing, observing the simple minded joy of young children. It was a sad thought to think that one day, that joy would no longer exist. It was almost inevitable in this new world. Blake would come to understand her place, and Jaune... Kali hoped that he remained the sweet, warm boy he was. She had no reason to believe he wouldn’t but...

An hour became two as they frolicked beneath the tree before a loud sound pierced the air, one of warning. Kali stiffened, familiar with it.

“Jaune, Blake,” she said urgently. “We have to return to the house.”

They looked to her in surprise but heard the urgency in her tone and didn't argue. Kali escorted them away from the lake and back up the long path to the Arc family home. Amethyst was just stepping out the front door when they arrived, her face filled with worry before smoothing out at the sight of them.

"Mom," Jaune said happily, running to her side enthusiastically. Amethyst bent down and picked him up, balancing him on her hip.

"Jaune," she said warmly. Those deep blue eyes regarded Kali. "There has been a Grimm sighting."

Kali nodded wordlessly.

A sighting, not an attack. If there had been an attack, there would have been more sirens.

Even at their age, Blake and Jaune understood the significance of Grimm. It was something taught to all children early, as soon as they could understand the concept of danger.

"Are the Huntsmen going to kill them?" Jaune asked, eyes wide in wonder.

"They are," Amethyst confirmed. "You don't need to worry."

"When I grow up, I want to be a Huntsman," he declared with all the seriousness that a near six year old could muster. "And then I'll make sure all the Grimm stay away. I'll protect the family."

“Is that right?”

“Yep. And then me and Blake can play for as long as we want and not have to leave.”

Amethyst’s expression shifted. It was subtle, gone within the blink of an eye but Kali caught it all the same. An uneasy feeling filled her and she looked down before Amethyst looked her way, keeping her eyes on the ground.

Now more than ever, Kali felt that subtle hint of danger.

“I see,” Amethyst said simply, voice even.

Blake remained silent as she often did around the matriarch of the Arc family. She only really spoke when spoken to.

As was the case now. Amethyst directly addressed her. “And would you like that, girl?”

Kali tensed. Girl. Never Blake.

Blake looked confused, eyes widening. It was clear that she wasn’t sure what to say. “Uh – yes?”

There was a moment of silence and then much to Kali’s surprise, Amethyst laughed.

"You would be grateful for my son's protection," Amethyst nodded, giving Jaune a loving peck on the cheek. "As you should be."

She then put him down.

Not a moment too soon as Aureolin came galloping up on the back of a horse, pants covered in mud and dust.

"They were spotted on the southern boundary," he said at once, all business. "Beowolves."

"Are you going out to meet them?"

He shook his head. "Just to move the sheep. They've been grazing down there. A team from Beacon was already in the area and they've been diverted to take care of it. But just to be on the safe side..."

Amethyst nodded. "Be careful."

Aureolin grinned. "Aren't I always?"

"No, and that's the problem," Amethyst scowled as he wheeled his horse around and galloped away before she finished. "That man, I swear. Insufferable."

It was clear to anyone that had eyes that Amethyst and Aureolin were deeply in love, and despite that thinly veiled tension Kali always felt in their presence, it always caused a pang in her chest. A reminder of what she lost, a reminder of what she would never have again.

Her fingers fiddled with her wedding band.

“Lunch won’t be ready for some time yet,” Amethyst turned around and made for the house. “The girls are all already inside.”

Sapphire and Saphron were keeping the rest of them entertained, taking their minds off the Grimm. When they spotted their brother, they waved him over.

“Come play with us,” Saphron said. “We’re going to play a boardgame.”

Jaune looked excited and without thought, grabbed Blake’s hand and pulled her over to sit with them. Kali watched the way Sapphire and Saphron shared a look but they didn’t say anything, and Iris even patted the floor next to her as if inviting Blake to sit with her.

When it looked like they were settling down for their game, Kali followed Amethyst into the kitchen. As soon as the door opened, she was hit with the mouth watering scent from freshly baking cookies, and on top of the stove a pot boiled filled with pasta.

Opening the fridge, Amethyst pulled out a block of cheese. “Grate half of this.”

Kali quickly moved over to the counter where a board and cheese grater were already waiting, and she got to work. It was unusual for her to work in the kitchen beyond cleaning, just as it was unusual for Amethyst to be preparing lunch instead of the chef. While she did bake often, the meals were designated to the staff.

But the chef was nowhere in sight.

Amethyst must have read her mind. "I gave him the afternoon off. Perhaps a hasty decision, if I'd known Grimm would make an appearance."

Her long blonde hair was done in a braid, and still it was long enough to brush against the back of her thighs as she moved around the kitchen. Onions were peeled and diced, and a number of herbs chopped roughly, freshly picked from the garden.

"There is smoked chicken in the fridge. Slice it thin."

Kali obeyed without question.

Carefully, she sliced the chicken breast at an angle, not so thin that they would break apart but no wider than that. Amethyst watched her with an amused smile, making Kali nervous.

"My son and your daughter are quite close, aren't they?" she asked casually, though there was nothing casual about it in truth, was there? Kali continued to slice the chicken breast. "As expected, growing up together. But they aren't family. Your girl will need to understand this, Kali."

"Yes, ma'am."

What else could she say?

“The rest of the world isn’t like our home. You’ve not left since I brought you here but you remember well, don’t you?”

She did. She would never forget that year in Mistral, struggling to survive.

“She will need to learn,” Amethyst said seriously. “As will my son. Perhaps not yet but sometime soon. There is a natural order and it must be maintained.”

Kali swallowed.

“But you’ve done well,” suddenly things lightened, Amethyst giving her a warm look. Kali tried not to trust it. She failed, feeling awkwardly proud for reasons she couldn’t comprehend – or rather, refused to. “Continue to do so. When your girl turns seven, you will begin training her in your duties.”

Kali nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Amethyst beamed. “Excellent. I’m glad we understand one another.”

They continued from there in silence.