

Mistral was never a very tolerant kingdom before the failed Faunus Rights Revolution, and things were only worse now.

Kali pulled her cloak tighter around her body, the harsh winter wind whipping through the towering peaks on which the city was built upon. Snow fell around her like a cascade of leaves, the ground slick with ice, and more than once she almost slipped and fell as she made her way down the cobblestone street. Tucked under her arm was a bag filled with what little groceries she could afford. Most stores in Mistral refused to serve faunus outright, and those that did charged exorbitant prices to reap the benefits.

She was running out of things to trade.

It had been less than a year since the failed revolution. They'd been so hopeful back in those days, filled with ideas of a brighter future for their people. A future where they were accepted and treated equally, united with humankind. If they could just show their strength, even if peace began at the end of a spear or the tip of a sword, perhaps things could evolve into something real and genuine.

Things had started well. It had been laughably easy to secure several of Mistral's key villages, cutting off their trade routes and reaping the benefits of bountiful harvests, and their extensive fleet of fishing trawlers. Their initial strike had almost completely crippled the kingdom overnight, a coordinated effort that saw them make further inroads across the continent.

While they never attacked the capital directly, they had it surrounded. Cut off. With the rail network under their control, Argus could not come to its defense without marching through the northern snows, and the faunus army could move men, vehicles and supplies without worry.

It was a masterful first strike – and it opened the way for more advancement. Pockets of faunus rose up in Mantle, in Vale, and in Vacuo, paving the way forward.

With control of Mistral and most of Anima, their forays onto Sanus soil had proved fruitful, securing several key locations along the coastline, and further inland, including a place called Fort Castle, an ancient fortress that predated the Kingdom of Vale by hundreds of years. Faunus were shipped across the sea to link up with their Valean brethren, bolstering their main attack force. But it quickly became apparent that their good run of fortune was ready to run out. Vale was far from crippled by their efforts at their border towns, and they marched out to meet them. From there, the war progressed three long, hard years before the decisive battle took place.

It was strange to think that they'd won this battle. General Lagune had underestimated the faunus forces and had attacked at night, his ignorance the undoing of many. The human army was soundly defeated, their inability to fight as effectively at night as faunus could due to their near perfect vision in the dark.

That should have been the turning point for them to forge on to a brighter future.

But instead, rather than break the spirit of the kingdoms, it only galvanized them.

Spirits high, they'd forged on towards Vale – but a trap lay in wait. They had been expecting only Vale soldiers but instead they were also met with Atlas. The uprising in Mantle had been quashed, and the northernmost kingdom had come to the aid of their once enemy, taking the faunus in the flank while Vale pincerred them from the front. The maneuver was only made possible due to the brand new airship Atlas had just developed, allowing them to cross vast distances faster than any other airship before it. It gave them total air superiority and movement across the battlefield. Because of this, they were taken completely by surprise.

Many faunus died that day – and with it, their dreams. The faunus in Vacuo were swiftly defeated soon after.

Kali felt the ache, deep in her chest. Her husband Ghira had been part of those forces. She still remembered the last time she saw him, as clear in her mind as the snow falling before her eyes. His warm smile as they embraced, unknowing that in her womb grew their first child...

A child he never got to meet.

These were dark days but they could've been darker. If not for their child, if not for Blake... Kali didn't know what she would have done. She recalled the despair she felt at learning the fate of the faunus forces, the fate of her husband. It had been a crippling blow, the tears and screaming endless. She hadn't been alone, a widow among dozens of others; hundreds.

Blake was her sole reason for living.

After the war, they could do nothing more than scatter to the winds. Kali had been staying at an outpost on the coast of Anima, and they'd had to flee as the human forces arrived with the crashing of the tides. Many had managed to flee to Menagerie, or so she was told. It was hard to tell what was true or false. What were the fanciful, desperate dreams of her people or fact? Many died in the wilderness. Those that managed to make it to civilization, well – things were never the same again.

Faunus rights were all but abolished completely. They were now truly second class citizens. New laws had been drafted and pushed through, the human kingdoms cruel in their victory. It was practically impossible to find work. If you were lucky, you may be permitted to work on a farm as labor or in a Dust mine. Some faunus women managed to secure jobs as cleaners, maids to the rich... but those were the lucky ones. The others? Prostitution was rife.

Human men had long fetishized faunus women. The market for it was enormous.

But that wasn't the end of it.

Slavery.

Kali panted as the cold air misted with every breath, carefully descending a set of stone stairs. The railing was covered in frost, stinging her gloveless hands. Eyes followed her with ill intent, a group of men seated outside of a tobacco shop. She made sure to keep her ears hidden and thankfully, they left her alone, likely thinking she was just a poor human woman, down on her luck.

If they'd known she was a faunus...

Slavery was commonplace now, though the official term was 'voluntary servitude'. Even now, they were trying to downplay everything.

A last resort for desperate faunus, giving up their freedom for shelter and food, to serve a family for the rest of their lives. It was a new program, rolled out in recent months to address what they called the 'homeless faunus problem'.

Some had advocated for genocide.

No matter how they prettied it up, it was slavery; plain and simple. Once you signed away your freedom, you were no more than property. No more than a *pet*.

Kali felt anger burn in her chest for a brief instant before it fizzled out, tired. She had wanted to believe that no faunus would ever debase themselves in such a manner. To give up everything – your dignity, your self worth – for what? A life of servitude? What was the point? Was that really a life worth living?

Their husbands had *died* rather than endure further insult by allowing humans to continue to treat them the way they had. Surely they could also show such courage?

But within weeks, thousands had signed up. Starving, defeated – faunus had prostrated themselves at their lowest point and somehow sunk even further.

...and the worst part was, as much as she hated it, Kali *understood*.

She was lucky in that Ghira had left her sizable savings but those savings had evaporated quickly. Their bank accounts had been seized after the war and what Ghira had managed to hide away, buried in various locations, had lasted most of the year, but now she was down to trading anything she owned; jewelry, clothes, tools, *anything*.

Soon? She would have *nothing*.

What then?

Kali was startled by sudden shouting. Tensing, she glanced around quickly and was relieved to find that it wasn't directed at her. That relief quickly turned to horror as she saw a young woman, mid-twenties at most with a long, slender tail being chased. Like Kali, she was 'free' – but that didn't save her from what was about to occur.

It happened in slow motion. A foot awkwardly placed, skidding across the slick stone. A shout of pain as she hit the ground, what meager goods she held spilling out of her bag. Two men – one with a scruffy brown beard, another with long blond hair pulled back in a rough ponytail – pounced upon her. There was a struggle, her screams piercing as she thrashed – until with a sharp crack, the bearded man slapped her across the face so hard that it split her lip.

Kali flinched at the sound.

“Calm down you stupid bitch or it’ll be even worse for ya,” the blond said, voice filled with sadistic glee.

She hurried away, heart pounding furiously in her chest, the backdrop filled with sobbing screams as the woman was hauled away, down a dark alleyway, out of sight. It hurt to witness, to hear – but Kali was powerless. What could she do? If she tried to stop them and failed, who would be there for Blake?

No one.

Disgusted with herself, Kali felt sick as she rapidly approached their home. Home was a loose term for it. The door was decrepit, the walls stained, the roof leaking. It was nothing more than a single room with a side area, a poor imitation of a bathroom within. An abandoned abode, unfit, unsafe – but it was all she had. She couldn’t afford rent, even if someone was willing to rent to a faunus.

This was it.

Blake was within but not alone.

An elderly faunus woman tended to her, her long silver hair threaded with brown feathers. As the door opened, she turned her head, face tense, only to relax when she spotted Kali.

“Kali,” she greeted softly. “Welcome back.”

Tawny was her name, a motherly presence for those remaining in and around Mistral. She did her best to keep tabs on everyone, doing what she could – but even she was beginning to feel the weight of their situation. Just like Kali, whatever funds she'd managed to save at the beginning were dwindling. Soon, she would have nothing left.

Tawny frowned. "What's wrong, child?"

Kali rubbed at her face. "What isn't wrong?"

Her elder hummed. "Did something happen?"

"There was a girl..." she trailed off, leaving it unsaid. It was more than enough. "How is she?"

Blake was bundled up in their best blanket, shielded against the chill.

"Sleeping soundly," Tawny said warmly, eyes soft as she hovered above Blake protectively. "Did you manage to get some food?"

Kali nodded tiredly, holding up her bag. "I had to pawn the rest of my jewelry. All I have left is..." her wedding band felt heavy upon her ring finger. Her hand curled into a fist. "...we can't keep going like this."

Tawny nodded, resigned. "I know, child. I know."

Kali looked around. "Where is Olive? I thought she would be here."

She was met with an expression of sadness. "She decided to sign up for... voluntary servitude."

It felt like the floor fell out from under her, Kali reaching out with a hand to steady herself on the wall. "What?"

Tawny sighed. "This morning, some hoodlums broke into her place and took everything she had."

It was like a punch in the gut. Olive was of an age with Kali, a pretty woman with vibrant eyes and an even brighter smile. Even amongst the shit they found themselves in, she was always a ray of happiness and determination. One of the few that seemingly never let anything get her down. For her to sign up for voluntary servitude...

"We have to stop her."

"It's too late," Tawny shook her head. "That's where she is now. Signing the paperwork. She'll be taken into custody until the nearest auction takes place."

Kali had to sit down, pulling out a rickety chair.

Olive was someone who wholeheartedly believed that many faunus had made it to Menagerie, and that a better life awaited them there, so for her to choose this option rather than attempt to make it across the sea, even if it was only a rumor... she was truly broken.

“She isn’t the only one,” Tawny continued sadly. “Over the last couple of days, I know of at least seven girls that have signed up.”

Was this to be their fate, then? Kali felt dizzy, disorientated. Bringing one hand to her face, she rubbed her brow as she leaned forward, feeling like she wanted to throw up.

“Kali,” Tawny said gently. “What are you going to do?”

Kali looked up, feeling wretched. “What do you mean?”

“Things here are deteriorating. It’s becoming more dangerous,” Tawny sighed. “You know it, I know it. We can’t stay here.”

The problem was; where did they go?

The villages surrounding Mistral were even worse than the capital. They well remembered the faunus occupation and were even more anti-faunus, if that were possible. Kali... could understand it, loath as she was to admit it. As much as she wished to deny it, the faunus soldiers had not been kind when they’d been in control of those villages. Trying to live in the wilderness or even attempt to start their own village was madness. After the war, the Grimm were riled up, the negativity generated whipping the creatures into a frenzy. Even several months on, there were still constant reports of Grimm incursions. Maybe that was why Olive didn’t even attempt to get to Menagerie.

The Grimm would get her long before she saw the ocean.

They had very few options.

“What can we do?” Kali asked, a little hysterical. “There is nowhere we can go.”

Tawny’s expression was grim. “You could sign up.”

She may as well have slapped her. “What?”

“You’ll be fed and clothed, and you’ll have a roof over your head – *listen*,” she said firmly when Kali was about to object. “Listen to me! Do you think I would *ever* suggest this if there was a better solution?” Tawny shook her head. “If you stay here, it’ll only be a matter of time until something happens. Maybe you’ll be attacked in the street, hauled away for goodness knows what. Maybe they’ll just burn this place down with you in it when they find out you’re a faunus. If you stay here, you’ll *die*, Kali.”

And if they fled, they’ll likely die, too.

“These old bones aren’t what they used to be,” she said wryly. “But I know what I would be doing if I was your age. I’d take my chances with the Grimm, and I can see that look in your eyes – you’re thinking about it. If you were alone, perhaps the Grimm would be better than *that*.”

Kali swallowed.

“But you aren’t alone,” Tawny looked down at Blake. “Are you?”

As unlikely as it would be to survive the wilderness in the current climate, she was right. If Kali was alone, she'd attempt it anyway. But with a baby by her side? An improbable venture became truly impossible.

"What are you going to do?" Kali asked softly.

Tawny smiled sadly. "I'm old. Even if I signed up, I doubt I'd garner much interest. Those that don't get picked, you know what happens to them."

They didn't know, that was the problem.

Kali had *seen* faunus with human families, those that had signed up at the beginning. Kali could see the self-loathing in their eyes, the pain at the loss of their freedom – but she had also seen that they were well looked after. Dressed well. Hair well maintained. Healthy in body, if not mind. She wasn't so naive to believe they were all like that, but many of them were.

People always feared the unknown more.

"I won't rest until the last of our people here have a way forward, no matter what it is," Tawny declared stoutly. "After that? Well – I'm not getting any younger."

Kali wanted to cry but managed to fight back the tears.

She slept horribly that night.

The truth of Tawny's words became apparent the next day. They tried not to meet up in large groups as it would only draw attention to them but there was one place in the bowels of the city, where even the army of Mistral dared not tread. The criminal underbelly was not to be underestimated here – and even if those very same criminals disliked the faunus the same as any other, they tolerated them because they could exploit them; for cash, for sex, for whatever they desired.

A small hub had been set up, an old warehouse that had fallen into disrepair. The roof was half caved in, and the walls were only standing due to hasty work done to secure them to the foundations. It was a deathtrap but it was the only place even the criminals stayed away from, willing to let them use it for their own ends.

If it fell over, only faunus lives would be lost.

As Kali stepped within, Blake secured to her chest in a makeshift harness, she saw with her own eyes, felt it in her heart.

There was despair in the air but it was more potent, visceral. Most of the faunus in Mistral were women, while the few men still around were casualties of war in a different sense. Men without arms or legs, faces disfigured from explosives. Men that hadn't been moved to their rear operating post before the combined Valean and Atlesian forces had helped liberate the lands around Mistral.

And then there were children. Young boys and girls, too young to fight but old enough to know and feel the pressure of what was happening. Their eyes held no joy, no thirst for life. They were in pure survival mode, just like everyone else. It was heartbreaking to see.

This is what Blake would look like, one day. Filled with sadness and anger. Filled with *fear*.

“Rouge signed up last night,” she overheard someone whisper, voice strained. “Fought all afternoon with her husband and stormed out. Next thing we know, Sky spots her going into the administrative building.”

“She left her husband to... are you serious?” another replied, appalled. “How could she do that?”

“He can’t provide for them,” an older voice said, rough, husky; a former smoker. Kali glanced over and saw his wrinkled brow, his bald head covered in liver spots. He had to have been in his seventies, at least. Too old to fight. “You wouldn’t know it to look at him but he is blind in one eye, and suffers double vision in the other. Blow to the head,” he grunted. “He managed to get a job in the mine but something must have happened because he only lasted a week, fired for messing up – so the story goes.”

“But to leave him like that...”

“We’ve all got a decision to make,” the elderly man continued. “You lassies, most of all.”

Kali couldn’t stand to hear any more but it was all around her. A few stalls had been set up and people were trading what they had amongst themselves. She felt the weight of the cabbage in her bag like a stone latched to her throat.

“Kali,” Cherry greeted her, a dog faunus with a long, bushy tail that waved back and forth. She had long red hair that reached her waist and deep blue eyes. “The usual?”

“Yes, I – how much can I get for this?” she almost choked on her words, removing the cabbage she’d managed to buy and placing it on the table.

“That’s a good one,” Cherry commented, examining it. “You’ve a knack for finding good produce.”

Kali suspected that the store owner that allowed her to shop in his store had a thing for her, though it didn’t stem from heart warming feelings. She’d felt his eyes on her body, more than once. Perhaps he was hoping that when he took all her money by overcharging her, she would then offer something else.

Food was valuable here but to Kali, there was something else she needed more. She watched as Cherry reached down and pulled out a couple of tins of baby formula. Blake was old enough to eat some solids but still required milk, and Kali had dried up as a result of the stress of everything that was happening.

It made her feel like a failure. As a mother, as a woman.

But it couldn’t be helped.

“Three should cover it,” Cherry said. It was a generous offer partially made because there really weren’t that many children young enough to need it, not any more. Many of the women that had been pregnant during the counter attack had miscarried, and those that didn’t had complicated births. Some survived only to die later, their mothers unable to provide.

The luckier ones had mothers that signed up for voluntary servitude.

“Thank you,” she said, placing the tins inside her bag.

Cherry’s eyes fell to Blake. “How’s the little one?”

“Alive,” Kali sighed. “Sometimes I wonder if that is a good thing or not...”

Of course it was, but she didn’t feel particularly happy at this moment. Not with all this talk, not with their current situation.

Cherry’s expression was full of sympathy.

The days continued in this way. Struggling to survive, scraping for every last scrap of *anything*. Searching for a way out, an end to this nightmare. Kali watched more of her people sign away their freedom and eventually, Cherry no longer manned the stall in the dilapidated warehouse, her source of milk powder gone. Familiar faces vanished one by one, and when Kali was down to the clothes on her back and the blanket wrapped around Blake to fight off the chill, and her wedding band – she knew.

She had nothing left.

What was the point of *freedom* if you were still caged by circumstance? What was the price of her pride? Her daughter’s life?

Tawny found her huddled, gut wrenching sobs shaking her body. Blake was a quiet child but the sound of her mother in distress drew forth her own cries, wailing to the heavens. Tawny helped calm Blake down before attending to her, gently wiping her gaunt cheeks clean. She was a mess of tears and snot, and dirt, her stomach cramping from a lack of nourishment.

She was on the edge.

“Kali,” Tawny stroked her cheek, fingers threading through her hair. “Oh, Kali. My dear child...”

The next day, Kali made the long journey with Blake clasped to her breast. The administrative building was clean; too clean. Spotless. Unnerving. The clerk watched her approach, and when Kali removed her cloak, revealing her ears, she saw smug delight on their face.

A savage thought occurred to her. Kali could claw her eyes out before anyone could stop it. Would she look so *fucking smug* then? But the thought passed as soon as it came, pushed to the back of her mind where it could not be given life.

“Welcome to the Mistral Services Building,” the clerk said, those eyes judging. “How may I help you today?”

There was no need for such a question. There was only one reason faunus came to this building and one reason only.

Kali feared she wouldn’t be able to say it, and yet her mouth opened easily, “I’d like to sign up for voluntary servitude, please.”

Her mother always told her that politeness could be a weapon, just as effective as anger or lashing out. More so, even. It was small, meaningless – but seeing the clerk’s eyes narrow briefly filled her with a vindictive flash of victory.

“Certainly,” the clerk gathered some paper and pushed it across the desk. “Fill in these forms. I assume your... *child* will also be signed up?”

Kali nodded.

“Excellent. Make sure that all information you provide is accurate to the best of your knowledge. Failure to disclose certain information will result in possible termination of the contract. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

She then slid a pen across the desk. “You do know how to write, yes?”

Kali took the pen and nodded, turning away before the woman could say another word. Finding a chair, she sat down and stared at the papers in her hands. All she had to do was fill these in and her life, and the life of her daughter, would be auctioned away to be owned by another person.

With her soul aching, she put pen to paper and signed away her life.